

Fish Bait
Sunday Epiphany 3, Year B
Jonah 3: 1 –5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7: 29 – 35; Mark 1: 14 – 20
January 24, 2021

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This last weekend, we were finally able to get together with Lora’s family to celebrate the birth of our Lord and to be with family. Due to a COVID scare we had to keep pushing it out. But, it was great to be with our family again.

As you may know, Lora’s father passed away this last year. So, this Christmas has been different and difficult.

One of the gifts my mother-in-law gave my boys was super special. They don’t realize it right now, but one day, I think they will. She gave them their grandfathers tackle boxes. He loved to fish and their first fishing experience was with him. He taught them.

After gaining the gift to them, she said to me, “Clif, there are some of his hooks and lures in the boxes, but he has so many more out in his shop. Go out there and get whatever you think the boys will need.”

Folks, let me say, I was touched, but also embarrassed. I am not a fisherman. My fishing experience includes getting a shovel and looking under cowpies for worms at my grandparents’ farm. Then catch and release whatever we caught in my grandfather’s pond.

That’s about it. I can not tell you the many different kinds of trout or catfish, let alone, what kind of bait or lures works best.

Needless to say, I was a bit like Jonah. Where she told me to go get lures, I was unwilling to do so. And, I hate to say, I didn’t do it. (Okay, I actually did go to the shop and look for the lures. I couldn’t find them and then never actually got back to asking her where they were. But, that doesn’t work so well with what I’m trying to say about Jonah. So, bear with me).

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, and worked hard to avoid it. Nineveh was a scary place. They were renowned for their violence and power. One man, let alone a man sent to tell them that they are sinful and in need of repentance, didn't stand a chance against them. Jonah wasn't dumb. He knew what would happen.

But, Jonah wasn't as afraid of God, as he was afraid of what God would do to the Ninevites. He knew that God wasn't sending him there to proclaim destruction and desolation. He wasn't going there like Moses to Egypt, where God sent plagues and destroyed the firstborn of all of Egypt. No, God was sending Jonah to Nineveh, so that they would repent... and upon repenting... BE FORGIVEN?!?!?! Jonah was afraid they'd be let off the hook.

As we find out at the end of his book, Jonah wanted God to give the Ninevites what for. They deserved it. They needed it. But, that wasn't the message God was sending via Jonah.

So, we know what happened next. Jonah leaves town, going the opposite direction of where he was supposed to go, gets on a ship, ship gets caught in a storm, Jonah gets thrown overboard (not by the storm, but by those on the boat who realized he had ticked off God), he gets swallowed by a big fish, and barfed back up on dry land.

THEN... then, listen to what happens next. "*Then the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time.*" Here's what I get from this; God allows us to make our mistakes. Even when He calls us, and we do our own thing, He will come to us again. This is comforting in so many ways. Sometimes we are openly rebellious, and need to be pushed to repentance... just like Jonah.

Jonah was a hateful, angry, vengeful man. If he didn't call them to repentance, then surely, they would not repent and God would have to judge them.

Many people, even you and me, have done the same thing. Someone wrongs us and, instead of going to them, like Jesus tells us to (Matt. 18), we simply shun them, never to talk to them again. We withhold the opportunity to call them to repentance, to win them back. Instead, because of our hate, we would rather just have them leave us alone. Way to go, Jonah.

But, there is comfort in this story and in that one phrase, “*Then the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time.*” God continued to work on Jonah. This book isn’t about the repentance of Nineveh, but the spitefulness of this prophet and the God who used him in spite of his ... spitefulness.

God wants all of us to come to Him. God wants all of us to do His will... yet, sinners that we are... we have our own idols to worship... our own desires that trip us up... yet, God is never far from us. He will always be nearby. Even in our sin, God is nearby, and *the word of Yahweh will come.*

Sometimes, there are those who are baptized, catechized, confirmed and then... poof... they leave the church. Yet, *the word of Yahweh will come to them a second time.*

I don’t want to belabor the point. But, I think it is important, simply because it is so comforting. Jonah messed up. We mess up. But, “*the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.*”

And, then what happened? Jonah did as God had instructed him. He went right into the heart of Nineveh. Marched right up to the people he despised, the people he wanted eliminated, the people he hoped God would destroy, and he told them to repent. The king heard it and clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes and proclaimed that everyone... and he meant everyone, even the livestock... to fast.

And, when God saw what had happened... He relented. Much to Jonah’s dismay.

Jonah...fish bait turned prophet. And, then, in our Gospels, we have men using fish bait and are called to be disciples; Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

John the Baptizer had been arrested. So, Jesus gathers up some of John's disciples, as we learned last week.

Some of these men were there when John saw Jesus, pointed him out for his disciples, and proclaimed, "*Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*"

These guys know who Jesus is, so it isn't too surprising that when Jesus shows up He simply says to them, "*Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men,*" and they jump out of their boats and follow Him.

Notice the different reactions; Jonah was totally unwilling to obey God's command to "Go" to Nineveh, yet, the disciples were more than willing to obey Jesus' command to "Follow." But, even more than their reactions, notice the bait that they would use.

Through Jonah, God offered forgiveness to the people of Nineveh. Through Christ, God offers forgiveness to the whole world. The bait is simple, as Jesus said this morning, "*repent and believe in the gospel.*"

Like Jonah, it can be difficult to face those who persecute us, who hate us, who have wronged us. But, forgiveness is for them, too. "Forgive us our trespasses, AS WE forgive those who trespass against us." It isn't easy, but hopefully you won't have to be upchucked by a giant perch in order to make it happen.

Yet, also, like the disciples, who were very willing to follow Jesus, we learn from reading further in the Gospels they, too, would often get it wrong. Peter denies Jesus, cuts off the ear of one of his lynchers... the others flee from Him. John and James want to be His right hand men when He takes over the world...

They needed that same message that they would end up preaching, “Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

Friends, you, too, need to hear that message. Repent. Repent from being like Jonah and denying forgiveness to the ‘hard cases’. Repent of being like the disciples and being selfish and foolish. Repent of being rash to judgment. Repent of not doing what God has commanded you to do. Repent of not loving God or your neighbor. Repent of wishing vengeance. Repent of being so selfish that you withhold forgiveness from others.

Repent. Repent. Repent.

And... believe the Gospel. Believe that God will forgive you. He promises it. The disciples will watch Jesus die for it. And, like Jonah in the fish, after three days, the tomb will spew Him out. He conquered Jonah’s sin. He conquered the sins of the disciples. He has also conquered yours.

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.
Amen.*