

Jonah 3:1-5,10  
Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany 3 b  
Fisher of Men

1-21-18

In our OT and Gospel readings, we see fishing taking place. It would seem in our OT reading that in incredible irony a great fish is doing a bit of fishing for a man (the prophet Jonah), and in the New Testament of course we find Simon and Andrew (as well as James of John) fishing. But in truth, we actually are seeing God fishing for men in both cases. In the OT, He was fishing for a runaway, rebellious prophet, and through him and entire city of rebellious and doomed men; and in the Gospel lesson God the Son was fishing for disciples through whom He would fish for runaway, rebellious doomed men - us.

In our OT lesson we heard the Lord tell Jonah to proclaim the Gospel, and the prophet of God does so. Very good. But there was that little phrase in that text: **"Then the Word of the LORD came to Jonah the SECOND time"** that reminds us what happened the first time God commanded Jonah to proclaim the Gospel to the good people of Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. It is important for us to understand that the Assyrians were a ruthless people, infamous for their brutality and torture. And they were known to be a gentile nation to the extreme, not only unbelievers, but out and out purposeful, personal enemies of the people of God.

Yet it was to these very enemies of God that God had compassion and sent Jonah to proclaim His Law and Gospel to them. The incredible compassion of God -- but that is His nature! And that is the point for today -- a lesson to us on the compassion of God to all of sinful mankind, even to us.

Knowing the kind of people the Ninevites were certainly can help us understand Jonah's reaction and reluctance to obey God's command. Who would want to see their enemies, cruel, vicious, hateful enemies, enemies of God as well, shown compassion by God? Wouldn't we really, deep down, rather see them get what they deserve from God -- a good plague or earthquake, etc.? We can understand that sentiment, right?

Jonah's reaction actually stands as a testimony to our natures and tendencies. Jonah refused to go and preach the Word of God to his hated enemies. He was so certain of the power of God's Word he was afraid to proclaim it! He was afraid it would work! He was so certain of God's Word to indeed cause the people of Nineveh to repent and believe in God and thus be saved from His wrath and judgment, that Jonah actually charters a boat to go the exact opposite way of Nineveh. (He didn't think they deserved such grace and mercy, and so he ran away from the

Command).

But so strong is God's compassion and mercy for the lost (and "unworthy"), it won't be turned away by a little boat trip.

You may recall how God then blew the sea into a fury, risking the lives of the sailors/men who hadn't any notion what was brewing. How God inconvenienced a fish I'm sure had better things to do than suffer three day's indigestion just to bring God's prophet to repentance and His gospel message to the Ninevites! (That's going to a lot of trouble just to reach His enemies!) But to God, they were worth saving, worth putting Jonah in the belly of a fish three days. So with a message from a God like that, the people of Nineveh listen. A God who thinks enough of them to turn the world, the lives of men and yes, the belly of a fish both inside out and upside down, with such a message of repentance of God's Word proclaimed, the Ninevites repent! For God's Word works - it works repentance and conversion where and when it seems impossible, making the unwilling, willing, the dead alive.

Thanks be to God for His compassion and powerful Word, for it is the same toward us.

Let it not escape us that we each are like the Ninevites. Every one of us was born with a corrupt and fallen, self-centered nature. Each of us was just as much the enemy of God as they were, born sinful and rebellious to God's ways and commands. Yet as "unworthy" as we are, we still had a God who sent His Son into our flesh to calm the troubled waters of God's judgment by enduring the wrath of God and the torments of hell itself in our place on the cross, and then being thrown into the belly of the earth/grave three days. And in His Mighty and Holy Power, He triumphantly rose from the dead in victory over the curse of death and the stain of our guilt. He had accomplished the complete forgiveness of all of our rebellion, sin and "unworthiness", period.

And then, God's mercy was so relentless in pursuing you, that though you by nature were His bitter enemy, those who would rather see Him dead, out of the way and be "God" yourself, He swallowed you up in His waters of mercy in your baptism!

Just as He caught the fleeing and rebellious Jonah in the waters of repentance inside the fish, so did He capture your rebellious and dead heart in the waters of the font, drowning and burying you with Christ, and then "expelling" you from your spiritual grave by raising you up unto New, True Life in the power of Christ's resurrection!

What incredible love and compassion your God had for you, His enemy, His lost child. His love for you and His powerful Word caught you and made you alive!

And such is His compassion and love for ALL the "unworthy",

all the "enemies" around you! The ones He wants to reach through YOU!

We were swallowed in God's love and grace and now are put forth into our callings in this world - put into the very places (relationships and vocations) God wants to work through us, to share His powerful Word with those around us.

God has commanded us, like Jonah, to have compassion on our neighbor as He has first shown compassion and love toward us (and share the Good News of the Kingdom of God that is at hand). To live our lives as a witness to the love of God in Christ (loving folks in tangible ways), and when given the opportunity, especially to those we have developed relationships with, sharing the God's Law and Gospel, a message of repentance and life.

But like Jonah we are not always so quick in obeying that command (maybe even running the other way). Why is that?

-Some might offer the excuse of not feeling prepared to share the good news of Christ with others. If so, why not? We are told to always be prepared to give the reason for the hope within you. That doesn't mean that we have to become expert theologians or memorize the entire Bible, or feel that we must be able to answer every question or objection someone might have. But we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - namely by spending time with Him in His Word and being here in His real Presence. It means being ready to explain to others about your faith and what God has done for them in Christ. Break out your catechism and make it a part of your daily devotional time. (Memorizing and understanding the Creed is a particularly useful tool, to be able to share with people what you believe and what the scriptures teach!)

-some may simply be distracted by the many affairs of life in this fallen world.

-for others, maybe its fear - fear of rejection or ridicule (what others might think or say about them).

After all, the message (God's Word) that we have been given to speak is offensive to sinful man. The Law condemns utterly, never excusing or overlooking the sinful condition. No one likes to be called a sinner, and the fear of announcing such a truth may be difficult to overcome. But one of the best things you can do is to also quickly share how you too are born sinful and unclean. You too are a sinful creature that commits all manner of sins against God and neighbor. But you have been forgiven in Christ. And He has enabled you in thanksgiving to be able to begin to drown the Old Adam and its sinful tendencies, to begin to resist your sinful nature. In other words, show them that you are not better than they, but you are

forgiven just as they are because of Christ.

The Gospel itself is offensive, for God's Word tells us that Jesus and Jesus alone is the only way of salvation (and that is offensive not only to a pluralistic and relativistic world, but certainly to a sinful flesh that wants to rely on nothing but itself for salvation.

And here on Life Sunday, we are reminded that even the message of God's gift of Life and the valuing and protecting of such life is offensive to this world and its culture of death. A world that loves itself and its convenience more than the life of the weak and vulnerable. And so many churches in our land tragically forsake speaking up for the defenseless, lest people be offended. But we are called to be faithful to God's Word, not popular, and so we will continue to proclaim the truth of His Word in its purity and entirety.

-- Or, like Jonah, we might refuse God's command because of the unworthiness of the people around us.

When your neighbor has hurt you in some way, perhaps repeatedly, how much are you thinking of the love of God for them? Instead, is it more often thoughts of revenge or hoping God will give them the just rewards? Is there more often thoughts of how unworthy these enemies are of God's forgiveness and love, as well as your love?

Yet God in His infinite mercy, still sought you out and caught you in His saving grace when you were still His enemy. And as you focus on that incredible, unconditional love, it actually can help you reflect that same love and forgiveness toward them, and move you to share the powerful Word of God (in natural and loving ways) with those around you, including your enemies.

And just as we can see by the effectiveness of the half-hearted, unwilling Jonah's preaching, we know that God will most certainly use His Word that is proclaimed through us to the people around us, no matter how "unworthy" of God we think them to be.

**CONCLUSION:** From the powerful Word of God spoken to you this day, God indeed so convince you of His compassion and grace that He empowers you to share that good news each and every day with the people around you, convinced that He indeed will be able to catch some and deliver them from the waters of rebellion and judgment and raise them up to true life with Him.