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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/25/2015, The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:14-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin with a verse from our First Lesson, from Jonah 3:

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:10, RSV)

My friends, we have some watery Bible readings before us this morning: We have the story of Jonah, and the story the call of the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. May God bless us and makes us to find that these lessons apply to us as sinners and as Christians longing to win souls to Christ. For that is who we are: we are sinners yet we trust in Jesus and want the rest of the world to be able to trust in him too.

In this morning's sermon I want to follow the lead of Father Mapple in his great sermon on Jonah. Father Mapple is a character in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. He is chaplain to the whalemens and seafarers in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He used to be a seafarer himself, until in older age he became a preacher and devoted himself to God's Word. In his sermon on Jonah, Father Mapple says that the story teaches a two-stranded lesson -- a lesson for all sinners, which means a lesson for all humanity, and a lesson for preachers. That's us!— each of us who are baptized, in our own way. So, let's listen to Father Mapple as he introduces his sermon.

Imagine the old preacher as he approaches the pulpit. He is held in high regard and affection by the whalemens for his piety and sincerity in preaching to his congregation, whom he addressed as his "shipmates." The pulpit is a high one, strangely without steps, probably to save space in that small chapel. But Father Mapple does not hesitate even a moment, but simply pulls down a rope ladder and climbs up into his pulpit as if he were climbing up the mast of a ship. When he enters the pulpit, he deliberately pulls up the ladder behind him, rung by rung. It has the effect on the congregation of the preacher withdrawing himself from the world in order to turn with full attention to God's Word.

The pulpit itself is interesting. It is shaped like the bow of a ship. And the lectern on which rests the Bible is the prow: it is the foremost part of the ship's bow, because, you see, this world of ours is caught in the midst of a great storm, and the pulpit is always the foremost part of the world. The pulpit must lead the way through the storm.

Father Mapple leads the congregation in a hymn, "which swelled high above the howling of the storm. A brief pause ensued; the preacher slowly turned over

the leaves of the Bible, and at last, folding his hand down upon the proper page, said:

“Beloved shipmates, clinch the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah—’And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.’”

“Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah’s deep sealine sound!... But what is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches? Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men, and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God. As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah. As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his wilful disobedience of the command of God— never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed— which he found a hard command. But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do— remember that— and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.

That is the first strand of this story: If we would obey God, we must disobey ourselves. And it is not always easy.

THE CALL OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES

Let’s begin this first strand of the story by considering our Gospel story of the call of the disciples along the Sea of Galilee. Jesus calls them -- Peter and Andrew, James and John -- and they obey:

“Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.”

Of course, at this early stage, these fishermen cannot know all that is involved in following Jesus, but even in this early start of the story, we find an illustration of Father Mapple’s first theme: To obey Jesus means disobeying ourselves. This disobedience to self is symbolized in these disciples by their leaving behind of their fishing nets. For fishing nets and boats are not incidental features in the life of Peter and Andrew, James and John. Rather those nets and oars and baskets for the catch and the very ropes in their boat are all part of who they are. They are

fishermen! Probably they are fishermen in a long line of such workers. Our text even specifies that James and John are with their father in the boat. They are fishermen like their father is a fisherman. But they leave nets and boats and father and ancestry behind, and in leaving these things behind, they leave themselves behind -- at least, as they have been heretofore. I think it is fair to say of them that in order to obey Jesus, they disobeyed themselves as they had always known themselves to be and headed off into an adventure and a new world.

And about that new world, it was a world that beforehand, they would have declined. If they had been having coffee at the table that morning, and wife or friend had said to them, "Peter, Andrew, James, and John, tell me. How would you like to become apostles and from now on make your living by preaching?" well, I bet those fishermen would have counted that but the merest madness. And yet, if they would obey Jesus, they must disobey their old convictions and identities and say Yes to something entirely new.

Jesus did not call his disciples because of what they had accomplished in the past. He did not say to Peter, "I have noticed you and your character and good works, and I judge you worthy of following me." No, he called him not because of what he had accomplished but because of what Jesus means to make of him in the in the future:

"Follow me and *I will make you* become fishers of men."

Likewise with us. When we wake up in the morning, it is fitting for us to say, "Now, what would Jesus make of me today? I've done plenty of things in the past, for good and for ill, but what would Jesus have me to do today, in this day that stretches ahead of me."

This question is but another version of Luther's answer to the question, "What does Baptism mean for daily life?"

Answer: It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.

Baptism means dying daily and rising up new. Or, as Father Mapple puts it, Baptism means disobeying ourselves in order to obey Jesus.

Lamar Williamson makes an interesting point about the *universal* call to discipleship in St. Mark's Gospel. In Mark, which is our Gospel for this year, Jesus speaks of the way of the cross for everyone, not just for the twelve, but for the multitudes:

And he called to him the *multitude* with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny

himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34, RSV)

St. Matthew, by contrast, uses the same words but addresses them not to the multitude but to the Twelve (Matthew 16:24). As for Matthew’s universal call to discipleship, it speaks not so much of the cross, but of rest:

Come unto me, *all ye* that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28)

The invitation to rest is, of course, a beautiful and important promise, but it is not a promise we find in St. Mark:

Mark is a lion: strong and tough. Here to be a Christian is to follow Jesus on his costly way in an imitation of Christ that brushes aside the pieties usually associated with that phrase and goes for the jugular of life itself.¹

So, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John. As life goes on, these men are going to learn that to obey God, they must disobey themselves, even to the degree of taking up their cross and going where they would not want to have gone beforehand but now must go if they would follow Jesus. Jonah learned that lesson long ago, and in the end he reluctantly went to Nineveh, preached his appointed message, and saved many a soul. The fishermen are going to find this too. So are we, if we would follow Jesus.

So, that is the first strand in Father Mapple’s sermon. It is meant for us sinners. If we would follow Jesus, we must disobey ourselves.

THE SECOND STRAND, FOR EVANGELISTS

Now, let’s turn to the second strand -- the lesson for those who long to win others to Christ. Here we learn that the story of Jonah is a story about the large-heartedness of our Maker:

For Jonah is not the story of a man and a fish. Jonah is the account of a man dealing with God who discovers that God has a deep and abiding concern for every single person, for every single city, for every single nation on the face of the earth.²

¹ Lamar Williamson Jr. *Mark*, an Interpretation commentary (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1983) pages 154-155.

² Rev. Raymond Shaheen, from his sermon “Jonah,” 1958.

This is the story of a reluctant preacher. He gets his marching orders from the Lord, and what does he do? He heads in the other direction, to the other end of the world as he knows it. And in this morning's reading, we find the precise reason that Jonah had fled from the Lord. We find the very thing that Jonah feared and hated in his soul. The man hated the idea of God being merciful upon all, for that word "all" includes Jonah's enemies. And so we read that the people of Nineveh repented of their sins, which the dreadful result, in Jonah's eyes, that the Lord repented of the evil he had planned for them:

⁹Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:9-10, RSV)

Strange idea here! That the holy One could find himself in need of repentance. But so it is. God "repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

Nor did he do it toward the woman caught in adultery, nor to the thief on the cross, nor to the soldiers who crucified him. "Father, forgive." No does he want to destroy you or me or our parishioners, or even our worst enemy. The Lord is merciful, always ready to forgive, always ready to wipe the slate clean and to let us and anyone willing to start again.

My dear old pastor Raymond Shaheen once acknowledged in one of his sermons about Jonah that when his people heard that morning that he was going to be preaching about Jonah, that a smile probably came to their faces. People love the story of Jonah and the whale, as incredible as that story might be. People are charmed by the idea of Jonah and the great fish, but perhaps they do not take the story seriously enough. And so Pastor Shaheen tried to help them along. As I read this particular passage in his sermon, please note that he preached this sermon back in the 1950s, during the Cold War, and so when he speaks of enemies, he meant real enemies:

I must tell you very candidly and very frankly, honestly I cannot tell you whether Jonah actually lived or not, any more than I can tell you that the Good Samaritan actually lived. As far as giving you a particular time and a particular place, as a matter of historical data, with all good conscience, *that* I cannot give you concerning Jonah. This is why I am telling you. I cannot tell you whether Jonah actually l-i-v-e-d. But this I can tell you, and for many it is a matter of much greater significance: Jonah actually l-i-v-e-s; Jonah lives in your heart and Jonah lives in my heart. Every single time any one

of us is foolish enough to believe that God can give us a directive and we can disobey, Jonah becomes very much alive in you and in me, the disobedient and the reluctant. I cannot tell you whether Jonah actually lived, but I can tell you that Jonah lives now. Any time anyone of us on bended knee fails to have a concern for the souls of God's children wherever they may be found on the face of the earth; if in my prayers I may neglect to raise a petition in behalf of the conversion of those who do not know Jesus Christ wherever they may be found, Jonah is very much alive in my heart. If I foolishly believe that this God whom I worship is a God who smiles only with favor upon Americans, that he smiles only with favor upon those who are people of the free world, that he smiles only with favor upon those who follow the capitalistic scheme, if ever I wittingly or unwittingly would delight in seeing all arbitrarily consigned to Hell, Jonah is very much alive in my heart and in my soul. If ever on bended knee I think of God as my own private God who has a concern for me and for mine and for us alone, Jonah is very, very much alive.

This is the second strand of Father Mapple's sermon. Those who follow Christ *must* become fishers of humanity. They cannot rest content that the world should perish, that a single person should perish, that a child should have so little chance to come to Jesus, that lost sheep should wander through out city without the Good Shepherd of our souls to guide them. They cannot be at ease in their minds that souls should be lost — not even the soul of their enemies. They must long for the salvation of others, which means they must eagerly desire that this world should be brought to Christ.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

I end with a word of encouragement for each of us who would love to draw our children, our neighbors, even our enemies to Christ. It is not only that we “must” become fishers of men, but also that we *will* become fishers of men, for that is the promise of Jesus to us. “... and *I* will make you become fishers of men.” Who ever heard of a fisherman who never actually caught a fish? How could we call such a one a “fisherman”?³ Likewise, who ever heard of a “fisher of humanity” who never actually caught anyone for Christ? Jesus says that if we would follow him, he will make us “fishers of humanity.” We are going to catch *someone* for Christ. Count on it. You might go your entire career and never know who it is that you have caught. No one may thank you for your on the integrity of your own walk

³ This sensible question was raised by Charles Spurgeon in one of his sermons on the call of the disciples.

with Jesus, yet that integrity might have won a soul to Christ. No one may ever come back to you and thank you for a certain earnest conversation you had. And yet, through your own following of Jesus and your patient fishing, you in fact caught a fish for Christ. Indeed, you might well have caught many of them, through the grace of merits of the One you follow, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.