

January 21, 2023 @ Trinity Bixby
 Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel
 Jonah 3:1-5,10 & Mark 1:14-20

You may remember the expression, “Brevity is the soul of wit” – ironically used in *Hamlet*¹ by the famously long-winded Polonius. I will endeavor today to keep the sermon soulfully witty – even if perhaps it takes a little longer to express the specifics. Indeed, it’s not so much *brevity* but *efficiency* that we prize today – the more efficient a business, the less expensive it is to make its products, and so, ideally, the more profitable it becomes. But ministry is a different kettle of fish all together – if you’ve ever read a theological treatise, or even noticed the multi-volume works by Calvin and Barth on the shelves of the church library, you’ll recognize that it’s difficult to say anything in just a few words. Even the Brief Statement of Faith in our Book of Confessions, which was designed to be used in a worship setting as an affirmation of faith – well, it’s long enough that we usually only use a third of it at a time. Trying to describe something as important as God, as important as our faith, as important as a divine calling is not easy for us. I say, “for us,” because God is quite capable of summing up a lot of difficult concepts into a short package.

Jonah, for instance, is the most efficient of the prophets. God wants him to prophesy to Ninevah – to speak truth to the powers that exist there, to trust that God has a reason for sending Jonah. Instead, Jonah runs away, going as far from Ninevah as he can get. And you know the famous story of the storm, and the sailors throwing Jonah overboard, and the great fish that swallows him until he prays and repents. Then, Jonah is spit out onto the shore, goes to Ninevah, and proclaims exactly five Hebrew words to... someone, possibly even the first person he sees in town. Jonah says, “Forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned.”²

From those five words out of the reticent prophet, Ninevah completely turns around. From the lowliest of the low to the noblest noble, all within the city repent,

¹ Act 2, scene 2.

² עֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְיִינְוָה נִהְפָּקֶת – od arbaim yom v’nineve nehpatchet – yet forty day, and-Ninevah will-be-overturned – Jonah 3:4b

all wear sackcloth and ashes,³ and fast, asking for God’s mercy. And God spares them after all – yet, Jonah is not happy. He complains, saying: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? I knew you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people.”⁴

Jonah, I think, didn’t realize how efficient he was as a prophet. Five words, for the salvation of 120,000 people. He was upset, because he saw the words that he spoke not coming true – he understood them to mean that Ninevah would be destroyed, which it clearly was not. Yet, the words of prophesy that he spoke were not directly about destruction – instead, they say, “will be overturned.” Ninevite society was indeed overturned – with newfound respect for God, and a recognition of God’s mercy. A whole city-state doesn’t wear sackcloth and ashes and fast without a recognition that they have changed greatly. Jonah was correct about God – that God is merciful, compassionate, filled with unfailing love. But the Ninevites needed to experience that aspect of God for themselves, and Jonah’s 5-word prophesy was just what was needed.

At first glance, it seems that Jonah is the most efficient of the prophets – it’s hard to beat a five-word to 120,000 saved ratio! But, of course, Jesus’ ministry ends up being the most efficient of all – one life, that saves all lives. At the beginning of this ministry – indeed, in the beginning of Mark’s gospel – Jesus is quite efficient at explaining his ministry. He sees fisherfolk, out on the shoreline, and he says to them, “Come, follow me, and I will turn you from fisherfolk into fishers of folk.” Jesus uses their own skills to help them understand their new role as disciples – and he often uses the ways that people understand their world to help them understand more challenging things, like heaven, repentance, and love for each other.

Interestingly, Jesus isn’t making up the expression, “fishers of folk” (or

³ Sack-cloth, interestingly, is straight from Hebrew. The word is Saq! It means a rough burlap, which later became associated with the cloth bags that we still call sacks today!

⁴ Jonah 4:2, selected

“fishers of men” to use an earlier translation.) The prophet Jeremiah uses it to mean something like bounty hunters – those chosen to root out evil from the exiles in Babylon before God returns the people to Israel.⁵ Instead of using it in this way, Jesus turns the phrase around – he changes it from hunting down sinners to raising up people to salvation. Unlike fish, for whom a fishing net means destruction, Jesus is making a point of hope. Humans, drowning in sin, need help to get into the boat of salvation. Fishing for folk, then, means casting out nets to lift people from a hostile environment into a safer one. People are not meant to be engulfed in watery chaos – we’ve always been meant for dry land – and those who follow Jesus are called to this task.

So far, we’ve been focusing on the second part of what Jesus called out to the disciples – “I will make you fishers of folk.” But it’s important that we understand the first part of the call, too. “Come, and follow me.” In those days, a religious teacher – a Rabbi – would select their disciples carefully from among their followers. Young Jewish men, who not only memorized the Torah but also the writings and the prophets – what we call the Old Testament – would hope to hear those words from the Rabbi they followed – “Come, follow me.” It meant that they had been selected as the “best-of-the-best-of-the-best.” As Rob Bell puts it, “It was a sign that you had it – you were worthy to be like the Rabbi. And Jesus doesn’t call learned Torah scholars, but ordinary men, with day jobs. “Follow me” was what the disciples had been yearning to hear all their lives.”⁶

Ordinary men, with day jobs – called to set aside their lives and follow this unknown Jesus. For Simon, Andrew, James, and John, this was a chance to be recognized as somebody. A chance to show all that they could do, now that they were given the chance. Their mission, in following Jesus, was one they could understand well – to change people’s lives for the better. To heal, to love, and to rescue people, just as Jesus was teaching them. And Jesus wanted them, not as

⁵ Jeremiah 16:16

⁶ “Dust 008” from the NOOMA series of sermon videos by Rob Bell
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkOZEt-KwZw>

warm bodies, but for who they were – for their skills and personalities, for their camaraderie and love. It may not have been a streamlined ministry, with each disciple chosen carefully for what they added to the group – but it was an e-fish-ent call (to fisherfolk), and all the fisherfolk that followed Jesus found their skills used in new ways!

The Methodist preacher and professor Halford Luccock, writing in the early 20th century, emphasized why this matters: "The Christian religion has often been unnecessarily bare, because acquired skills have found no outlet in it. The church has often suffered a smothering and paralyzing blight from the dominance of the false idea that an emptied mind, stripped of all the rich flavor of individuality, stripped of fine talents of every sort desperately needed in the building of Christian community, was the most acceptable gift to God.... [On the other hand, w]e see it in all Christian history: physicians who have brought the skill of mind and hand, businessmen who have brought organizing capacity, housewives who have brought the skill of homemaking to the larger goal of world housekeeping. All these have found new ends for old means." Setting aside Luccock's unnecessarily sexist worldview for a moment, his point is still quite strong – just as Jesus called the disciples to bring their best selves, to use their pre-ministry training into the ministry setting, so too does Jesus call each of us. But Simon, Andrew, James, and John – they were also called from the lives they had known. They had to leave their boats behind to become fishers of people. To have an e-fish-ent ministry.

There will be times in your life when you don't have time to weigh the odds, to make rational decisions – when you must rely on your gut. You must, immediately and efficiently, determine whether to follow the call given to you. Like the disciples, you may have to leave behind things which matter to you. Like Jonah, you may be tempted to run the other way, screaming. But the more time you spend loving God and loving others, the more likely your gut will point you in the right direction. Whether you've heard Jesus call you directly, or you feel like a part of the crowd of folks following him at the periphery – your skills matter. Your life matters. In Latin, the word for calling is *vocare* – the root of our word *vocation*. I encourage you

to listen for God's call, to hear and not be dismayed – for God is merciful, loving, and seeks to rescue you and all you encounter. Help others get on the boat, or at least cling to the nets – and you will be a part of God's e-fish-ent ministry.

May you answer God's call, follow Jesus where he leads, and spread the Holy Spirit over all you meet, trusting in God to lift everyone into the boat of salvation. Amen.