

Sermon – Fish Stories  
Scripture – Jonah 1  
Sunday, April 19, 2015  
Rev. Trajan McGill  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

*1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." 3 But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. 4 But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. 6 The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." 7 The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" 9 "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 10 Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. 11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. 14 Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." 15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. 17 But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

The title of the sermon: Fish Stories

"Tell us why this calamity has come upon us," the sailors demanded. Our friends and family could ask us the same from time to time. God sending a raging storm in which the whole ship is caught up may sound strange, but it should not. For everything we do affects those around us! When we refuse to own up to our calling or live up to what we are meant to be, it is not rare but common that others experience stormier lives as a result.

Do we ever know what we should do but not do it? When this happens, people are shortchanged, left out, and hurt. Or perhaps we carry a burden, the guilt of knowing, deep inside us, that we are meant for something but are ignoring it? That is too heavy a burden, not the kind carried without affecting us; and because feeling guilty ourselves is one of the biggest reasons we treat those around us badly, this failure leaks out and rains on all those who are our shipmates in life. And we should ask ourselves on a regular basis: are there people around us in danger of sinking because we are napping rather than hearing the call to serve?

No, encountering storms in one another's failures shouldn't sound unrealistic to us, and neither should the fish. Most of us know people, or have been people, or are right now people, who, running from what they know to be true, have been swallowed up by a bottle, or by a syringe, or by one of the many other traps to be found in the world, and have remained there, in a still smaller space, with even less oxygen than the belly of a whale, for much longer than three days.

We refuse, and we flee; we create rough waters, and we are eaten up by life, but do you recall the second chapter of this story? Jonah cries out and is heard by God from the depths. And then we encounter one of the most important moments in this book: chapter 3, verse 1, which begins, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."

This should speak hope to all of us who fail to heed when we hear the word the first time. Found throughout the scriptures, and in our own experiences, if we have tried to follow Christ for any length of time, is a God who hears those who turn back, and who repeats the call once more. Because of this, I believe calling is actually a continuous thing, not just a single "purpose in life." God calls us not with a to-do list fixed at birth, but continually from wherever we are today, to purposes surrounding us now.

And if that's so, then "missing one's calling" may not mean what we think. If God calls me toward something, and I ignore it or screw it up until the opportunity passes, then later I repent, God doesn't say, "Sorry, buddy, I don't have any reason for you to be here anymore." I may have missed out on one thing I was called to do, but God still calls me to something else I can be used for. God is continually turning failure and sin on their heads and bringing good out of them. If I run away defiantly, seeking forgiveness isn't the end, but a new beginning; I then find out where God wants me to go now, though it may not be the same place I was being called to before.

So where do we hear God's voice? God's voice is in this book [the Bible]. God's voice is in what we know to be true in our hearts. God's voice is in the things we speak to one another as sisters and brothers in Christ; in the thoughts, the ideas, the encouragements, and often in the criticisms, too. God's voice is in the pleas of our neighbors and the needs of the community around us.

We often wait, wondering, "What is my Calling-with-a-capital-C, the overall design for my life?" Well, that is not always revealed, but I'll tell you what, I guarantee you already know something, probably quite a few things, you ought to be doing but are not. We are making a mistake if we wait for an entire map of our life purpose. What, if you are honest and open with yourself, do you *already, today* know that you are meant to do?

Once, when I was a boy, and my dad, my brother, and I came back to shore after a long day of fishing with nothing at all to show for it, we hatched a plan for telling a little fish story. In one of the buildings of our camp, there were some mounted fish, of which we borrowed several; then each of us carried a pair of them back to camp, looking proud and pretending to struggle under their weight, appearing as though we had the catch of a lifetime. Of course, the illusion didn't last long, but it was a fun moment.

Fish stories come out of the fact that fishing is long, slow work, where sometimes you come back with no evidence of accomplishment. You want something to show, or at least something to tell. And sometimes the work we're given to do is like that. The results can't always be proven. Other times, we resent the work itself, or the people it serves.

If we remember the end of Jonah's story, we see he had both problems. He likely felt the exasperation of traveling a long way and then walking the city declaring the end was near, only for no apocalypse to appear after all. He also seems to have wanted to see judgment, not be a part of getting people off the hook by stirring them to repentance.

We readily share with Jonah the anger of resentment and often have the frustration of no proof that our efforts accomplished anything. But as Jonah learns, the aim of our work is not to feel accomplished, and deliverance belongs to the Lord. We must be thankful for the grace which falls upon Ninevah, because it is the same grace that meets us, lost at sea in the storm of our own defiance, and brings us up from the belly of the whale. Thanks be to God; amen.