

“Fish Stories”

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

One of my favorite movies, that dates back to the 70's (of course... many of my most treasured memories come from that decade), is the movie **“Dave.”** How many of you have ever heard of this movie? It stars Kevin Kline as the owner of a small town employment agency, who also happens to be a ‘dead ringer’ for the current President. ‘Dead ringer’ is the operative phrase, for when the President is unexpectedly stricken with a debilitating stroke, this simple, unassuming Midwesterner is brought in to ‘portray’ the President until his medical situation is resolved. And despite its perhaps unrealistic plotline, it does speak to how some down-home, grassroots common sense could practically impact the often NON-sensical environment of our national government. Hmm... maybe it could STILL be of interest TODAY... ☺

Anyway, one of my favorite scenes featured ‘Dave’ (as the ‘President’) at a manufacturing plant. He is allowed to operate some huge, steel robotic arms which directly mimic his own human arm movements. To the delight of the great crowd of workers and reporters, he stretches out his arms...along with his metal ‘mirror images,’ which now stretch to an expanse wider than our sanctuary... and declares with great conviction, *“I once caught a fish THIS BIG!”*

I think that we ALL have heard... and maybe even spoken...this phrase before. It refers to that ‘embellishment’ that some fishermen might use in describing their accomplishments. Details to their story that might make their claim just a little hard to believe. Words that might cause the hearer to doubt their truthfulness...

This morning we have heard a couple of ‘fish stories.’ Both involve some details to the story that might make them both just a little hard to believe. While you were only ‘given’ a brief portion of Jonah’s story in what was read (by Charlie/ Carole), most of you are probably aware of how his ‘whale of a tale’ goes: God instructs Jonah to go to the great port city of Nineveh and preach to its people the need to **repent** from their evil ways and **turn** to God. But he gets scared and boards a ship headed in the very opposite direction. And when they get caught in a perilous storm, the ship’s crew (after ‘catching wind’ of Jonah’s disobedience to God) fear him to be a ‘bad luck charm’ (a ‘Jonah’) and toss him overboard... where he is quickly swallowed by a ‘great fish’ (or ‘whale’). **It is after he is ‘spewed up on shore’ by the ‘fish THIS big’ that we pick up the story with God

speaking to Jonah **“a second time.”** And to his credit, Jonah learns from his previous mistake of disobedience, and carries out his ‘mission from God.’ But to do so, he had to get swallowed by a ‘WHALE’? Hmm... sounds a little ‘fishy’ to me, wouldn’t you say?

And then there’s the well-known story about Jesus’ ‘recruitment’ of the first disciples. **Fishermen who were going about their daily routine of mending nets and preparing for their day’s activities. And along comes this perfect stranger... one whom they, by all we know, had never laid eyes on before...and he says to them, **“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”** (Mark 1:17) NO ‘Hello, my name is Jesus.’ NO ‘My, nice day to go fishing, eh?’ Just this cryptic, 10-word command. And what happens next? ‘Are you NUTS?’ ‘Just who ARE you, anyway?’ NOPE. **“Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”** (Mk. 1:18) REALLY! Pun fully intended, doesn’t this too sound just a bit ‘FISHY?’

So, just what does it take for stories that sound just a little hard to believe to be more believable? How is it that one can come to be convinced that the seemingly far-fetched tale of one person is indeed TRUE? Well, to borrow from terminology well-known by our legal ‘counsels,’ **truth** is established by **evidence** and by **testimony**... by the **statements** of credible **witnesses**.

As for the really BIG ‘fish story’ involving Jonah, it ‘might’ be a little challenging to obtain statements from any ‘eyewitnesses’ on that storm-tossed sailing vessel, or even the people of Nineveh. But how about the testimony of a pretty ‘credible witness’ named **Jesus**? In the Gospel according to Matthew, we read these words:

*“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, **we wish to see a sign from you.**”³⁹ But he answered them, “An **evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given** to it except the **sign of the prophet Jonah.**”⁴⁰ For just as **Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.**”⁴¹ **The people of Nineveh ... repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!**” (Matthew 12:38-41)*

Wow. A seemingly obscure character whose 4-chapter story is buried in the midst of those ‘minor prophets’ in the Hebrew Scriptures gets a shout-out from the very Son of God. We have considered before how there were some OT books that Jesus seemed to have ‘favored’ by his quotation of them. Well, Jonah obviously had some significance to our Savior... and therefore, should for us as well!

Upon closer inspection... and 'intro-spection'... we find that Jonah and Jesus do share some **similarities**. BOTH were from Galilee, and sent by God first to the Israelites, and then to the Gentiles... sent to remind the people of their need for **repentance**. Both of these men fell asleep in a boat in the midst of a storm! And though he did at first flee from fulfilling God's command, Jonah would show his willingness to die for his people, both shipboard and in Nineveh. And Jesus? Well, I don't think much needs to be said about HIS willing sacrifice... And finally, both of these men would be 'buried' for three days... and then delivered from death in order to save the lives of others.

There are, of course, fundamental **differences** between Jonah and Jesus. Jonah initially ran away FROM God's will... Jesus willingly went TO it. Jonah was **guilty**, deserving of punishment for his disobedience. Jesus was **innocent**, completely UN-deserving of the price that He paid on our behalf. And, most importantly, Jonah was spared death in order to be a WITNESS to God's truth and love. Jesus was spared death in order to be the PROOF of God's truth and love...

By Jesus' validation of the truth of Jonah's life and ministry, our great 'Teacher' offers his hearers... then and now... some valuable lessons. That running from God's purposes for our lives will not end well. That even when we may reject our God, and feel to be in the darkest depths of pain and suffering, God will deliver us. And that in **gratitude** for our **salvation**, we are given a 'second chance' to **respond to God's call to proclaim** before others His **mercy and love**. 'No fish bones about it!'

Which brings us to the second story about the calling of the first disciples. It begins with Jesus, upon the occasion of his most outspoken advocate, John the Baptist, being put in prison, going out into the countryside proclaiming the same message as John did: **"repent and believe the good news."** (Mt. 1:15) In addition to Jesus' preaching of this message, he also began to recruit others to assist in this effort. It was as though the loss of his 'chief evangelizer' was a rallying point for Jesus to get some help in 'spreading the good news'...

But, to borrow from an old Broadway play title, 'A funny thing happened on the way to the Temple.' Jesus didn't call up the local seminary to get the lowdown on the 'best and brightest' graduates. He didn't solicit the help of the most popular televangelist or megachurch leader. Jesus walked 'down by the riverside' ... er, seashore... and stopped to recruit a few fishermen. Yes... smelly, dirty, uneducated, unpolished *fishermen*. AND, not only did he choose some of the most UN-likely candidates to lead this revolutionary new religious movement, he had some likewise pretty odd recruiting techniques. 'Hey, YOU! Come follow me. And I'll MAKE you fish for PEOPLE.'

Say WHAT? No polished 'elevator speech?' No professional brochure or eye-catching video? NOPE. Just simply 'come and follow me and we'll catch people, not fish.' And how did they respond? ***"And immediately they left their nets and followed him"***? That's it. No hesitation. No further questions. Boom. 'Let's go!' REALLY?!

Just WHAT was it that led these simple, hard-working fishermen to leave their vocations, their families, their homes, to follow this 'man of mystery?' Some believe that Jesus had been watching them for a while, and that his **intense interest** in these particular fellows had something to do with their willingness. Perhaps they found the notion of 'fishing for men and women'... for being a **part of something** much **bigger than themselves** and their routine, everyday lives... was remarkably intriguing. Or, more than likely, it was simply the intrinsic **power** of Jesus' **language**... both verbal and non-verbal. By the tone of his voice... by the intensity of his eyes... by the strength of His Spirit... that there was something simply **irresistible** in the way Jesus spoke to them. By all that was in Him, those 'men of fishing' were 'hooked' by the love of Jesus to go 'fishing for men.' The power of his love that was so irresistible, so undeniable, that it demanded their 'immediate' response... Even if they themselves were not really sure just WHY. but to simply **trust** in this man, and to **obey** what he said. The truth of their faith in Christ was borne witness to by the testimony of their actions.

Whether it be a wayward messenger named Jonah, or a number of unsuspecting fishermen, their message to us is the same: while we may not understand the call that God places on our lives, we are yet to "Trust and Obey." Because of Christ's interest in US... to be a part of something BIGGER than us... and most importantly, because of Jesus' irresistible, undeniable love for us. That that the truth of OUR faith in Christ will also be borne witness to by the testimony of OUR actions. To simply... maybe NOT so simply... 'trust and obey.'

The famous hymn by that name... which was written, btw, by a Presbyterian minister ... came out of an experience at a revival in which a young man accepted the call on Christ on his life. And when he stood up at a time of testimony, to share just what it was that made him make this life-changing decision, he declared, *"I am not quite sure—but I am going to trust, and I am going to obey."* Perhaps that might also be the best testimony that you or I could give... to simply say others, when given the opportunity to declare just why following Jesus is so important, 'I am not quite sure—but I am still going to trust, and I am going to obey.' And THAT, my friends, is NO 'fish story'...

PRAYER TIME

*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,
“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.*

*⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight;
yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’*

*The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me;
yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.*

*⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.*

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

*⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay. *Salvation belongs to the Lord!*”*

(Jonah 2:1-9, ESV, selected verses)