

“God’s Catch and Release Program”

Jonah 2:10, Mark 1:14-20
Epiphany 3-B, January 21, 2018

Fish stories—you’ve got to love them, don’t you?

Mark Twain, the famous American author, once spent a three-week vacation in the State of Maine—fishing—during the month of October—when fishing in northern Maine, was strictly forbidden by their state law!

When his vacation ended, he boarded a train for the long ride home to his beloved Missouri! But wouldn’t you know it? No sooner had Mr. Twain sat down on that train, when a rather “sour-faced-looking” New Englander, dressed in plain clothes, sat right down next to him! Shortly thereafter, the two men struck up a lively conversation!

“Spent a little time in Maine here, have you?” the stranger asked Mr. Twain.

“Indeed I have!” replied Mr. Twain. **“And let me tell you something! It may have been the “off season” for fishing” up here, but I have two hundred pounds of the finest rock bass you have ever seen—iced down in the baggage car!**

“By the way,” Mr. Twain continued, “who are you, sir?”

“I’m the state game warden,” was the reply! “And who are you?”

“Who am I? Huh? Why I am Samuel Clemens, whose pen name is Mark Twain; author of such bestselling books as HUCKLEBERRY FINN and TOM SAWYER! And anyone who knows me—I mean anybody who really knows me—**knows that I am the biggest liar to be found anywhere throughout all of these United States!**”

Fish stories, you’ve got to love them, don’t you?

Today is a good day for us to remember that as many as 7 of 12 disciples Jesus first chose to follow him were professional fishermen; so that fishing was certainly much more, to these men, than a mere sport that occupied some of their time “free time” on the weekends!

Much of the fisherman’s day was spend mending or washing his nets. Andrew was doing just that when Jesus called him as a disciple (Luke 5:2). His brother, Simon Peter, watched Jesus climb into his boat, then preach to the people. While the Apostle John, as we heard last Sunday, much like St Mark in today’s Gospel lesson—both present Jesus’ call of these men to become his disciples rather nonchalantly, and in a rather unemotional way—St. Luke heightens the drama connected with this event significantly!

He remembers that when Jesus concluded his sermon from the front of Peter’s boat that served as our Lord’s pulpit that day—that having said—“Amen”—that Jesus next instructs Peter to put his boat out further from the shore and to let his nets down for a catch!

Peter was reluctant to do so, but Peter was obedient to Christ, nevertheless!

Every good fisherman knew that the best time for fishing was at the break of dawn, but here this man named “Jesus of Nazareth,” by trade a carpenter, tells Peter at 10 o’clock in the morning, perhaps: “Let your nets down for a catch!”

“Master, we have toiled all night long and not caught a blasted thing, but at YOUR WORD, I WILL DO SO!” And having done so, the catch was so enormous that Peter’s boat began to sink! Alongside of James’ and Johns’ boat too, whom they requested to help them, their boat began to sink as well—because the catch was so enormous!

You, know, following that first Easter Sunday—in one of our Lord’s post-resurrection experiences on the Sea of Galilee—this same thing happens again! This time a Mysterious Stranger (the Risen Christ) calls out to these fishermen from the shore: “Children, have you caught any fish?”

“No,” the group responds! So the Mysterious Stranger further commands them: “Throw your net out on the opposite side of the boat!” And no sooner had these disciples done so—and **déjà vu** -- it was a windfall of a catch again!”

John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” called out: ‘It is the LORD’ and Peter dives into the water and swims as fast as he could to the shore to meet our Lord” (John 21:7)!

Someone has said, “You can take fish out of the boat, but you can’t take the love of fishing out of the fisherman!” And isn’t this true. The Apostle John who shares this story with us goes on to tell us that there were 153 fish caught there that day, and not just any-sized fish, but 153 LARGE fish as any good fisherman would report the story!

I can see can’t you, how some of the qualities needed in a man for him to become a professional fisherman---could also be great qualities in making men effective missionaries and witnesses to Christ; especially in that day! Much of a fisherman’s day back then was spent mending or washing nets! Fishermen often worked long into the night, using two types of nets. The circular net, about 15 feet in diameter with fine mesh was cast into shallow water. The long net—sometimes 328 feet long and 8 feet wide—was a “dragnet” in deeper waters.

A well-flung net would drop over an entire school of fish bringing in everything it had caught—and for years to come—following that first Pentecost Sunday when the Holy Spirit had been poured out on each one of these men—they would be “casting their nets” in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the very ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). BUT IT WAS ALWAYS THE LORD WHO WOULD PROVIDE THE MIRACULOUS CATCH!

But again there is a big difference between fishing for fish and fishing for people! In fishing for fish—live fish are taken out of their healthy environment to die—but in fishing for people—human beings are taken out of their unhealthy environment—of a world steeped in sin and death—to live in the kingdom of God—where there is the forgiveness of sins, the more abundant life—and life everlasting!

Still in so many of the 50 States of the United States today, “anglers,” a fancy name for “fishermen,” are encouraged to participate in what became known in the 20th Century as a: “Catch and Release Program.” Within recreational fishing it is an advocated practice intended to be a technique of conservation. After capture, the fish are unhooked and returned to the water. In many states, if the fish have not reached a certain size—they are legally to be returned into the water. I read that using “barbless hooks,” though I have never seen one, it is often possible to release fish without removing it from the water—so that a slack line is frequently sufficient!

My brothers and sisters, if Peter was reluctant to let down his nets for a catch, when Jesus first commanded him to do so, we can become reluctant to carry out our task to witness to Christ—to share the Gospel with others—to genuinely welcome new people who may come to worship at our church—as guests—too. We may be reluctant to do our part to help fulfill the GREAT COMMISSION (Matthew 28:16-20)!

That’s why the hymn-writer again says to all of us in this Epiphany Season:

**Let none hear you idly saying, ‘There is nothing I can do!’
While the multitudes are dying and the Master calls for you.
Take the task he gives you gladly, let his work your pleasure be!
Answer quickly when he calls you! ‘Here am I, send me! Send me!’**

And you talk about reluctant! The Prophet Jonah in our Old Testament lesson this morning was certainly a reluctant prophet too, wasn't he?

Have you ever stopped to think that long before the Department of Natural Resources, right here in South Carolina, began to advocate its own "Catch and Release" program, that God had devised a catch and release program of his own? And isn't that what we see happening to the Prophet Jonah in the first verse of our Old Testament lesson today: "And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" – Jonah 2:10!

The story of Jonah is set within the Eighth Century BC, when the Assyrian Empire was the greatest super power in the then-known world. The Assyrian Empire had conquered many smaller, neighboring nations and, therefore, gained the reputation all throughout the Fertile Crescent of being a big bully. Known for their cruelty, the Assyrians routinely deported the citizens and residents of those conquered territories and replaced them with foreigners. And this was even the great misfortune that befell the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BE.

The Jewish people were deported to Mesopotamia and replaced with the people who later became known in our Lord's Day as the Samaritans. Therefore the Assyrians were a hated people and Jonah no doubt became a participant in what he thought was a justifiable hatred toward these Assyrians.

But surprise of all surprises, the WORD OF THE LORD came to Jonah one day telling him to journey to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria named Nineveh and to preach the Word of God to its inhabitants in order that they might repent of their sins and be saved before God great day of judgment would befall them that they might be saved. God was going to give these hated people of Nineveh an opportunity to repent of their sins and live.

But to Jonah, the very idea of going to the city of Nineveh with God's message was a repulsive task.

Therefore in his outright disobedience to God's command, he boarded a ship and headed straight in the opposite direction—towards a city named Tarshish—some 2000 eastward rather than the 500 miles westward, where the LORD God Almighty had commanded him to go!

To make a long story short a violent storm came up at sea; Jonah who was now plagued with a guilty conscience publicly proclaimed himself to be the object of God's wrath and invited the crew to throw him overboard.

They did as Jonah asked them. But's that when a large fish was appointed by the LORD God to go and catch Jonah, lest he drown. This is the same LORD God who been worshiped and praised all throughout Israel's history as the Lord of the earth; of the sea and of the sky. Three days after he was caught and saved, Jonah was released by God when that giant fish vomited him up upon the dry ground!

Now that Jonah was convinced—that his obedience to God—was necessary, he goes and completes that assignment with remarkable success, all due to God's blessings on his efforts of course. **The people of Nineveh believed Jonah's word because Jonah's word was, in fact, the very Word of God! And the people of Nineveh showed that they were genuinely repentant for all of their sins when they called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. Why even the King of Nineveh, when the Word of the LORD reached him, arose from his throne, removed his robe and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he issued a public proclamation, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish!"**

You would think that after Jonah preached that sermon and received the powerful results that he did, he would indeed become extremely ecstatic and would have experienced the greatest spiritual high he had ever been on in all his life.

But friends, nothing could be further from the truth. Listen to verses immediately following our Old Testament lesson today: ***“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I KNEW THAT YOU ARE A GRACIOUS GOD AND MERCIFUL, SLOW TO ANGER AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE AND RELENTING FROM DISASTER. THEREFORE NOW, O LORD, PLEASE TAKE MY LIFE FROM ME, FOR IT IS BETTER FOR ME TO DIE THAN TO LIVE!” (Jonah 4:1-4)***

To that unfortunate reality I can only speak those infamous words of Private Gomer Pyle that were often spoken in the 1970s situation comedy GOMER PYLE USMC: “Shame! Shame! Shame!”

What better prayer could we pray this day than the prayer:

***God Whose Almighty Word, chaos and darkness heard, and took their flight;
Hear us we humbly pray and where the Gospel day sheds not its glorious ray, let there be light!
Lord, who once came to bring, on your redeeming wing, healing and sight,
Health to the sick in mind, sight to the inly blind, on, now to humankind, let there be light!
Spirit of truth and love, Life-giving, Holy Dove, Speed forth your flight:
Move on the water's face, bearing the lamp of grace, and in earth's darkest place:
Let there be light! Amen***