

Fish Stories

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Epiphany III

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

Mark Twain once spent a pleasant three weeks in the Maine woods. On his way home, making himself comfortable on the train to New York, a dour-faced man sat down next to him. The two struck up a conversation.

“Been to the woods, have yeh?” asked the stranger.

“I have indeed,” replied Twain. “And let me tell you something. It may be closed season for fishing up here in Maine, but I have a couple of hundred pounds of the finest rock bass you ever saw iced down in the baggage car. By the way, who are you, sir?”

“Oh, I’m the state game warden. Who are you?”

“Pleased to meet you,” replied Twain. “Who am I? Only the biggest liar in these United States.”

What is it about fish stories that lend to exaggeration and embellishment?

“You should have seen the size of the one that got away.”

“I caught one last week that was this big (*outstretched arms always part of this description, of course*).”

“Snagged a couple of dozen today but threw most of them back.”

Even the Bible can lay it on a bit. Jonah, in the chapter before the one we read today, gets swallowed up in the belly of a whale and, after three days, is spit up on dry land. A whale, really? For three days?

Even today’s Gospel account is a bit fishy. Simon and Andrew are in a boat casting their net into the Sea of Galilee. They hear a stranger calling out from the shore for them to come and follow him and, according to Mark, without hesitation they drop their nets and go. The same thing for brothers James and John, who leave their poor father Zebedee in the boat as they hop out to follow Jesus.

Could it have happened just like that? Why would these four have left everything in an

instant to join this traveling preacher?

Well, there may be an element of exaggeration in these stories—hyperbole if you prefer that term---but it's there to make a point. Jonah runs from God's call to give some bad news to the Ninevites and ends up in as deep and dark a place as you can find. Even there, God hears his cry for help and rescues him, proving that there is no place we can go, no depths to which we can sink, that is beyond the compassionate reach of God.

And true, the four fishermen may not literally have dropped everything at the first word of invitation. The moment described in Scripture could be the culmination of many encounters with Jesus over the course of weeks or months that have been telescoped into this one scene for dramatic impact.

On the other hand, maybe it happened just that way. Perhaps the four followed as impulsively as Mark says. Whenever we reply to the summons of God or do something we know we must do, it is in some way an impulsive, irrational act. Faith itself is doesn't always make sense---it's the conviction of things *not* seen, as Hebrews says. But somehow it makes sense of your life, just as following this strange man calling from the shore puts all of the pieces together, even if you don't know exactly where you're heading when you start out.

I was speaking this week with a woman who has decided to apply to seminary. She has had a successful career in business and raised a family with her husband, but she has been through some tragedy and terrible heartache as well. She is well-liked and active in many community concerns, but she has come to the conviction that she has something to offer that's beyond being on the school board or town council.

"I feel called to minister to people who are suffering or in pain," she told me. "Some of my friends think I'm a little crazy to go back to school at my age, but it's what I need to do." Chalk up another one for God.

I suspect that if we were to describe the spiritual experiences of our lives, moments when we have felt the presence of God or a deep bond with those around us, it would be hard to describe them without resorting to some exaggeration. These fleeting episodes are so deeply ingrained in our memories, so formative to how to perceive the world and our lives, that normal words cannot convey their full significance. If we were to go into them in any detail, they might even sound a little fishy to other people, so we largely keep them to ourselves.

"You think that Jesus wants you to go to Haiti to help build a clinic. Ok, whatever you say."

"You say you had a feeling in your gut that you should serve on that committee at church even though you don't really have the time for it. Sure it wasn't heartburn?"

“You heard God telling you that you were going to survive this nightmare and that everything somehow would be ok, one way or another. Are you certain it wasn’t wishful thinking?”

We can rationalize the call. We can ignore it. We can even run from it. But Jesus will keep after us, keep speaking to us, addressing us, calling to us—he’s very persistent that way. And we’d be crazy not to listen.

Lots of times we think about a calling coming to the ordained ministry or other religious professionals. But each of us here has spiritual gifts to be used in the service of the kingdom.

Our calling needn’t be big and dramatic. Small ministries often make the greatest difference. As Rick Warren says, “The most important light in my home is not the large chandelier in our dining room, but the little nightlight that keeps me from stubbing my toe when I get up to use the bathroom at night. It’s small, but it’s more useful to me than the show-off light.”

Today at our Charge Conference we will review our church’s ministry and elect those of you who have answered the call to serve. As you think about your role in our faith family, I have a question for you: Do you have a job in this church and this community . . . or do you have a ministry? There is a difference.

If you are doing something because no one else will, it’s a job. If you’re doing it to serve the Lord, it’s a ministry.

If you’re doing it just well enough to get by, it’s a job. If you’re doing it to the best of your ability, it’s a ministry.

If you’ll serve only so long as it doesn’t interfere with other activities, it’s a job.

If you’re committed to staying with it even when it means letting go of other things, it’s a ministry.

If you quit because no one praised you or thanked you, it was a job.

If you stay with it even though no one seems to notice, it’s a ministry.

If your concern is success, it’s a job. If your concern is faithfulness, it’s a ministry.

If you have a job in the church, give it up and find a something that will bring you greater satisfaction. Discover your ministry. God doesn’t want us feeling stuck in a job but excited, fulfilled, and faithful to our calling.

And here's the best part: God doesn't call us just because something needs to be done. God calls us because *we* need to do it. It will bring our lives greater purpose and deeper meaning. We'll find just how much Jesus can make a difference in our lives, how he can impact the way we deal with others. And along the way, we'll get caught up with some pretty great people. It's quite a deal.

I promise you, that is no fish story.