

January 21, 2024  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark 1:14-20  
Followers Make Good Leaders

Two ardent fishermen met on their vacation and began swapping stories about the different places they'd fished, the kind of tackle used, the best bait, and finally about some of the fish they'd caught. One fisherman told the other of a vicious battle he once had with a 300-pound salmon. The other fisherman listened attentively to the story. He admitted he'd never caught anything quite that big. However, he told about the time his hook snagged a lantern from the depths of a lake. The lantern carried a tag proving it was lost back in 1912. But the strangest thing of all was the fact that it was a waterproof lantern, and the light was still lit in it.

The first fisherman said nothing for a while. Then he took a long deep breath. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said slowly. "I'll take 200 pounds off my fish, if you'll put out the light in your lantern."

Those are fish stories. Something's fishy about the tales. A fish story doesn't have to include fish, but the idiom's origin alludes to the tendency of fishermen to exaggerate the size of their catch.

Some of us may think of the scripture passages Linda read this morning as akin to fish stories. Jonah being swallowed by a big fish and then after being spewed out upon dry land he decides to listen to God and go to Nineveh to warn city inhabitants of their imminent destruction.

In the gospel, Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee sees fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea. He says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. A bit farther on Jesus saw two more fishermen, another set of brothers, James and John, who were mending nets with their father. “Immediately Jesus called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus.”

Two reasons this seems like a fish story. First, who do you know who would drop everything they’re doing, abandon their work, and follow a stranger to who-knows-where? Second, fishermen as fishers of men & women, is a nice play on words but what does that mean in real life?

Are these fish stories, or the living word of God for the living of these days? Let’s cast out and see what we’re able to catch.

The setting for the gospel passage is near to Capernaum, the center of the fishing industry and believed to be the largest city in the densely populated region on the shore of the lake of Galilee. Josephus, who for a time was governor of Galilee and is an historian of the Jews, writes that in his day 330 fishing boats sailed the waters of the lake. Fish was the staple diet of the people. Fishermen were common, simple folk. Simon, Andrew, James and John did not come from the schools and colleges, they were not called from the

clergy or the aristocracy, they were neither learned nor wealthy. They were fishermen, that is to say they were ordinary, simple men.

These ordinary fishermen were casting, they were mending and tending, they were among family, when they got the call from Jesus. Immediately they left their nets, their father, what they were doing, and followed Jesus.

We think of the disciples' behavior as unusual—that is to drop everything and follow Jesus—and it is. But what's also unusual is Jesus' behavior. In the days of Jesus' early ministry, rabbis didn't seek out students, rather students sought rabbis. Teachers waited for people to come to them, and they interviewed the student-to-be carefully before deciding whether to take the student on as a disciple. No self-respecting rabbi would ever have gone out to recruit his own pupils, and if he had, he would not have picked the first four people he laid eyes on, nor would he have selected an ordinary crop of fishermen.

Mark's Gospel flies in the face of social & religious convention by depicting a leader or teacher who seeks out ordinary fishermen, untested, unapproved by the standards of the day, literally calling them off the boats. And then the reaction of these fisherman defies not only the convention of the day, but also the convention of every day and time.

Mark's Gospel is off to a reckless start—it's unpredictable and it defies all kinds of conventional norms.

Some people, when they hear about the call of the disciples, worry if they have what it takes to be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus. They think, I couldn't do that, just up and abandon everything for Jesus (which is more or less what those first four disciples did).

But maybe Simon, Andrew, James and John weren't making conscious, rational, thought-out decisions. It seems they didn't have the chance to figure out their call. Jesus called and they followed. We may think what courage and faith they had to sacrifice everything to go after Jesus! But, there didn't seem to be any anxiety, or torn hearts, no backward glances; they dropped what was in their hands and followed Jesus. It's as if something beyond their control happened to them, —perhaps it was the Holy Spirit. Maybe they were bowled over by God's grace. Jesus showed up. Then they showed up. Then they followed Jesus.

Our theme here at the church for 2024 is to show up for each other, God, and community. The first part of the year until Lent we're thinking about the different ways we may show up for each other. This can take many forms. Not only do we show up in person at worship and church events, but also, we can show up to listen to someone, and give another person our undivided attention. Showing up for one another may mean stepping into a leadership position here at the church even when we may feel out of our league.

Today we'll ordain and install elders and deacons who are showing up to take on roles and responsibilities at PPC in governance and care giving. The new officers have gone through a period of training and have written their own faith statements. Yesterday they

showed up to be examined by the Session and today they've showed up to be ordained and installed as elders and deacons. Showing up means saying yes to being a follower of Jesus which in turn makes leaders at PPC. In this case, followers make good leaders.

Perhaps you saw the article in Friday's New York Times by Rabbi Sharon Brous that elaborates on our theme of showing up for each other and also touches on today's theme of following in order to lead. Rabbi Brous applies learnings from an ancient practice written about in the Mishna. She describes this ancient practice, where believers would make an annual pilgrimage to the temple and walk clockwise around it. Those however who were sad, grieving, needing repentance, in pain, or had committed crimes would walk counterclockwise around the temple.

While walking around the temple, "each person who encountered someone in pain would look into their eyes and inquire: 'What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?'"

'My father died,' a person might say. 'There are so many things I never got to say to him.' Or perhaps: 'My partner left. I was completely blindsided.' Or: 'My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results.'

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: 'May the Holy One comfort you,' they would say. 'You are not alone.' And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached."<sup>1</sup>

The rabbi writes,

"When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Two Lessons from an Ancient Text that Changed My Life" by Sharon Brous. *The New York Times*, 1/19/24

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

She continues,

“Showing up for one another doesn’t require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and to the birthday dinner. Reach out in your strength, step forward in your vulnerability. Err on the side of presence.

Small, tender gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the face of grave human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. We need this, especially now.”<sup>3</sup>

Those simple fishermen who dropped everything to follow Jesus became the leaders of his movement and ultimately the church. Those two pair of brothers who we thought were nuts to turn away from all that was familiar and follow became leaders, writers, teachers, martyrs, rocks on whom the church is built. They showed up for each other and for Jesus and teach us even today with their seeming fish story that followers make good leaders.

Who will you show up for this week without giving it much thought? Just go and show up. I wonder if that’s one way you and I can be fishers of people—to show up for each other. Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid