

“Open Season”

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

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In my home church, there’s a man I have looked up to as a “grandfather,” I’d even call him grandpa from time to time. His name is Jerome. I always knew that during the third weekend in April, we wouldn’t see him in church or at any church activity that may have been scheduled. Can anyone guess why? (*pause, wait for answers*)

The third Saturday of April is the opening day of freshwater fishing season in Connecticut. This meant that Jerome would be out on a lake, somewhere in the state, in over-all waders, with his hand-tied flies and rod for the majority of the weekend. This was what he looked forward to most every year. For him it was the culmination of the anticipation of the season.

Today’s Gospel takes place during “fishing season” on the Sea of Galilee, a place that was known to have abundant amounts of fish. Little did Simon, Andrew, James, and John know that on that day, they would begin learning to angle for game that was more abundant and more rewarding than what they caught and sold in the market; game that has no season. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Jesus’ call for the four fisherman marked the first day of “Soul Savin’ Season” a season which never ends.

Today, not only do we hear about the call of the fishermen, but we hear about the man in the fish: Jonah. Cathy read for us the part of Jonah’s story where he finally agreed to fulfill what God had asked him to do- go tell the people in Nineveh that they would be destroyed for their wicked behavior. Nineveh had a reputation as a place that was unrepentantly evil. It was the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrians were the enemies of the Israelites; having conquered and exiled the Hebrew people. With that in mind, Jonah’s desire not to go and proclaim God’s message to them, may seem like it was justified.

Both passages are an urging to true repentance and action. Those of us who are following along in the Upper Room Disciplines will recall from Thursday that repentance is turning in a different direction. It’s turning away from the sinful acts or thoughts we had and beginning a new path. Turning away from the things in life that separate us from God and moving in the direction of God’s will for us.

The Ninevites were given no direction, just a statement that the city would be overthrown. How they knew where Jonah’s authority came from, we don’t

know; after all, Jonah's message to them was vague. All we know from this passage is that first, the people believed God's warning and acted on it. Their belief, and later their King's belief moved them to action.

The King replaced the symbols of his own power with symbols of mourning and penitence. He proclaimed a fast, not just of the Ninevites, but the animals, as well. They believed. They repented, in both word and deed. And they were spared. Indeed, the culture at Nineveh was overthrown, just not how Jonah thought it would happen.

At the beginning of the Gospel lesson, even before calling his disciples, Jesus was proclaiming in Galilee, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The good news is that the law of the prophets has been fulfilled, in the coming of Jesus.

Jesus is calling attention to the work that God was presently doing in the world through him in that time. For us today, it is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection on Easter and the activity of the Holy Spirit that we can point to as the good news. In this, Jesus says to us, "Repent, and believe the good news." Turn away from whatever is coming between us and God and believe in the message of salvation.

So, that brings us to a fork in our spiritual path. Do we keep doing what we've been doing? Follow the same, smooth-looking course that doesn't necessarily lead away from God, but it's not the path directly to God? After all, we are each at a different place on our spiritual journeys. We acknowledge that as a congregation, as we can note on the front of the bulletin, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here."

Instead of the same old path, Jesus is calling us to join him on a trail that's not yet been cut; there's an outline of a trail (*hold up the Bible*) as a guide. It's a different direction, and it's not as easy. The Gospel passage also tells us that John the baptizer was arrested for his proclamations about Jesus and the coming of the kingdom of God. The different path is not guaranteed to be an easy one; in fact, history has shown that it is probably going to be a tougher trail to navigate.

Romans 10:9-15 and 17 tells us,

"if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in

him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?... So, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” (NRSV)

When we come to believe in Christ, we are called to first change direction. Where is our life going? Sometimes, it’s a small course correction; sometimes it’s a wake-up call. Either way, it is our call to share it with others. If we, who have the message of salvation in our hands don’t share it, we are holding back the most precious thing from others. How can others hear the message if no one will share it?

In a world filled with so much hate-filled rhetoric, persecution, discrimination, and disregard for common decency and goodness to our fellow humankind, we have the message that people are looking for. We offer a message of hope and salvation. We don’t all have to think alike. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, has been quoted, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?”

When it comes down to it, Jesus came into this world as a baby. Grew up, and lived a life as a carpenter’s son. Began his public ministry and spent three years preaching and teaching the good news of the kingdom of God. He became the sacrifice of all sacrifices so that you and I would be made righteous in a way we could not accomplish on our own.

Why? Why did Jesus do all that? John 3:16-17 tells us, “‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’”

The answer is love. It is the love of God we withhold from others by keeping Jesus to ourselves. Jesus’ life was never meant to be a secret and not everyone who hears the message will accept it for themselves. But in the current national and global climate, no matter which side of the aisle we’re on, we are called to love

one another. Love our neighbors, love our enemies, reach out to the least, the last, the lonely, the lost.

The mission of the United Methodist church is "...to make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the world." In my last interview with the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, I was asked how we go about transforming the world. I honestly had a difficult time coming up with the answer.

We transform the world through the relationships we build and the way we witness to what Jesus Christ has done for us. How simple is it to share the good news? It's as simple as telling one person we care about what our relationship with Jesus does for us. Our lives are full of experiences, trials and triumphs that can all be used to spread the good news.

One line from Friday's Upper Room Discipline reading stuck out to me: "Jesus calls us to transform the world by living in justice and compassion, using the skills we have developed and the language we know." We already have the skills we need. We have the message that the people outside those doors are longing for. They are longing for a place that will welcome them and love them unconditionally. They are looking for a message of hope in a time where everywhere we look, and everywhere we go, there's a message of hostility or inadequacy. We have that message of hope. We are that safe, welcoming, and loving place.

Beyond these walls, there are souls longing for another person to care. The streets, the stores, the restaurants, the gyms, the schools... all these places have an abundance of souls looking for an answer to the pain that they experience. Jesus is calling out; can you hear him?

Sing: I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men, I will make you fishers of men, if you follow me. If you follow me, if you follow me; I will make you fishers of men if you follow me.

It's Open Season.