

*Drop Your Net!*  
A Sermon by David Roquemore  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Jonah 3: 1-5, 10  
Mark 1: 14-20

Let's get going! Come along! Drop your nets and follow me!  
Jesus calls his disciples. And they follow. They don't get it right, a lot of the time. They bring misunderstanding and fear and pride with them. Often they go back to fishing, but whenever he travels, they go with him.

Jonah is called. He gets the word from the Lord, to go north to Nineveh and proclaim God's displeasure with the Assyrians. Do What? The Assyrians were the baddest people in the ancient world. Their army is great and terrible. They are a constant threat to Israel for a long time, before they finally take the northern kingdom away. No one with any sense would do what God tells Jonah to do! Jonah runs off and boards a ship bound for Spain. You know the story: a storm comes, the sailors realize this is God's judgment on Jonah; they throw him overboard, a fish rescues him, he repents, and the fish vomits him up on the seashore.

And then God speaks a second time and says, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." And so, trembling, Jonah goes. He is amazingly successful. Unbelievably successful. It would be like some unknown preacher converting the Taliban. Unbelievable! And Jonah, well, Jonah gets mad and pouts – he is angry with God because God is so forgiving and merciful. Jonah wants to see some punishment, some justice! He is like the older brother of the prodigal son, angry because God accepts the wayward son so happily. God is just too gracious. Jonah ends up unhappy.

I think of Jonah as the reluctant disciple. He drops his net, alright, and heads the other way. He hears the call, and runs from it. The other disciples do better, don't they? But still they are hesitant at times. Why do you think that is? Why are we so hesitant to heed God's call?

### **We like Safety**

We like safety. We like what we know. We like what is comfortable, familiar, and controlled. We like the lives we have. And Jesus comes along and says forget fishing that way – I will make you to fish for people. Jesus comes along and says, forget the familiar and routine – I will give you an entirely new and different life. That is threatening. Like Jonah we run. We run to the safety of what we know and try to find ways to live out Jesus' call in it.

Last Sunday the message was that each of us has a call to repent and follow Christ. But we don't feel any urgency about it – the safety of what we have always known makes us complacent. Paul in First Corinthians 7 speaks of an urgency that is more important than family, or business, or even our personal experiences of grief or joy. Paul has a sense that Jesus will return any second, there is no time to waste, no time to spend on our own feelings or work or even family values. Of course, as time went by, and years stretched into decades and even centuries, the Church lost some of that sense of urgency. Yes, we say, Jesus will return, someday. And so until someday comes, I have time. There is no urgency, no need to leave the safe and familiar.

Don't you think that is a large part of it?

I have never been much of a fisherman. I hesitate to talk about fishing in front of some of you, but here goes. Fishing is a risk. Every time you put the line in the water, you risk. You might lose your lure. You might lose your entire pole. You might hook an old shoe. You might even catch a fish! And then what would you do? Gut it? Clean it? Cook it? That's a risk. Or, worse, you might not catch a fish. You risk going hungry. Very risky, this fishing. Much better to stay home and grab them out of the freezer.

Much better to stay home and avoid fishing, even fishing for people. Much better to stay with what we know than to venture out into the unknown, even with Jesus!

The French priest and poet Michel Quoist writes this about commitment and safety:

*People today no longer want to make lifelong commitments. This is a serious failure. An adult is someone who can put a lot of thought into what he's doing, with or without outside help, and who is capable of making a definitive choice whether it is on an occupation or another person. Faithfulness is then the ability to stick with his choice, the will to fight for it, and turn any obstacles into positive elements in his chosen path.*

*Unfaithfulness is a disease afflicting both the individual and society. Society throws the individual into new experiences which are never brought to any conclusion. Unfaithfulness is to be put off by any obstacles; weakness is man's downfall. Constantly uprooted, he can never reach maturity and bear fruit.*

*(With Open Heart, Gill and Macmillan, 1983, page 117)*

When we desire safety too much, we show that we are immature and unfaithful. Faithfulness to our commitments means, at times, taking risks. Are you ready?

Pope John Paul II said once, “Do not be afraid. Do not be satisfied with mediocrity. Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” I like that. It ought to be on our refrigerators, our bathroom mirrors, on a t-shirt. Don't be afraid, no matter how difficult the challenge! God himself is calling you/us to this. We need not fear.

### **The Task is Daunting**

Another reason we are hesitant to heed Christ's call, more like Jonah than Peter, James, and John, is that we pale at the size of the task. Jonah wouldn't believe that God could do

anything with so mighty a place as Nineveh. In the same way, don't we sometimes look at the world and despair of being able to make a difference?

When you look at the poverty in this world — well, can you even believe it? A woman came in this week: her husband had died, she had no money, she'd spent weeks at his bedside, and so hadn't paid her rent, she'd been evicted, she was wearing inadequate clothes. And that is just one of them. There are so many... don't you just despair we can ever make a difference?

You will remember that Jesus said, "the poor you will always have with you," which has become a sort of excuse for Christians. They will always be there, so ....eh! Shrug! What can we do? I think the former Pope would urge us to do what we can regardless.

One night a few weeks ago I was up late and watched some of Lawrence O'Donnell's program on MSNBC. Some time ago he started a program called "Kids In Need of Desks", which provides desks for students in Malawi. He told the story of a young woman for whom someone had provided a scholarship that paid all her expenses for high school (which you must pay for in Malawi). It was a touching story, then he got to the point: all of this cost around 5000 Kwachas, which is the money in Malawi. Five thousand kwachas! Who has that kind of money? Uh, we do! It translates into three dollars in our currency. For the price of a cup of coffee, we can send a girl to school for four years!

The task is daunting, but we can make a difference. How is that Christian discipleship? Perhaps in all of this turmoil, this economic upheaval that threatens our lifestyle and our comforts, perhaps in this we will hear the voice of Christ calling us to set aside our comforts and safety, and follow him.

I saw a sign in Pennsylvania: "Beer gives us hope!" Does this mean that people are so afraid, so in need of hope, that they take this seriously? Do people need hope in our time that badly? Yes they do. Our society is not as bad as some, but we do find our comfortable and usual support structures changing fast. Are we going to survive? Yes. Will things be different? Yes. What is the task of the Church in this world? To proclaim Hope, the Hope that comes in Jesus Christ alone.

The disciples would have preferred to stay on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, tending their nets and fishing. They might not have done anything memorable, but there was enough to eat and work to do. They would live out their lives as their fathers had done, fishing. But this Jesus said, drop your nets. Leave what you are accustomed to, and come, let's do something new. It will be risky and daunting, but it is worth it. Come on!

Perhaps that is the call we hear today. Perhaps that is the call we hear as a congregation. Your elders are working on hearing God's call for us. Congregations must always be listening for God to renew the call and say what they are to do next. Our leaders are doing that. It isn't easy or safe, but they are doing it.

Do you think God will show us new ways to be the Church, new ways to obey Christ in our time and place, new activities that share Jesus in the community? Do you think our safe lives together will be challenged? I think so – this congregation has been much the same for many years. That happens to all congregations. There is a certain sameness that prevails and reassures us. At the same time, maturity and faithfulness leads us to follow and not be put off or daunted by the obstacles that come along.

So what, today, for you? Drop your nets! Examine your life and see where in it you prefer the safety of habit to the call of Jesus. What do you cling to for security that you could drop and follow? What do you love more than you love God?

If you drop your net, what will you do? What is God calling you to do? Who is God calling you to talk to about Jesus? Jesus said he was calling them to “fish for people” – what people out there need to hear from you about him?

Yes, we prefer the safety of our nets, of our usual routine, but Jesus calls us to something else, something new, something more. And whatever it is, Jesus gives you the grace to do what he calls you to do. Fear not! Drop your net. Let’s go.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.