

LEAVING THEIR NETS

Jonah 3:1-5, 10, OT p. 860
Mark 1:14-20, NT p. 35

January 22, 2012
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

They left their nets. What did that mean for those brothers who had never known any other life? They made their living from that large inland lake, the Sea of Galilee. In 1999 I stood by the shore of the lake. It was calm, large, rimmed by hills, and stretched off to the north where it disappeared in the haze. For three days, this body of water would dominate our sight, our minds, our imaginations. When we woke in the morning at the kibbutz and left our rooms to walk to breakfast, there it was, the rising sun touching it with soft colors. As we drove northeast, there it was, on our left. From the Golan Heights, we could see the entire lake, with its farms and kibbutzim on the shore. It was easy to see why control of these hills is so important to both Israel and Syria.

At Dan, near the Lebanon border, we encountered the headwaters of the Jordan River, which supplies the Sea of Galilee with its fresh water, though much of the water now is diverted for irrigation. At Bethsaida, near the north end of the lake, we crossed the Jordan on the delta which had filled in, separating that fishing village from the sea. From the Mount of Beatitudes on the west, again we could look across the lake, and we saw the birds of the air. We took the path that was part of the ancient “way of the sea,” a trade route from Egypt into Galilee, past Nazareth and Capernaum, to Damascus and Mesopotamia beyond. We walked on this ancient road where Jesus had surely walked. And we arrived at Capernaum, a fishing village on the shore of Galilee.

There we saw the excavations of a first-century house, one that our guide said they were 75% sure was Peter’s house. It had obviously been used as a house church from the earliest Christian times. It was small, though we could see by the various foundation stones that it had been expanded. The original room would have been barely large enough for Jesus and the twelve to sit in. Was this where Jesus had his “home base?” We know he left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum.

It was near Capernaum that Jesus walked that day. Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew were

fishing, standing waist-deep in the lake, and casting a net. It was probably early morning. Jesus passes by and says simply, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” No introduction, no persuasive talk about the kingdom of God, no miracles. Just, “Follow me.” And they do. Immediately they leave their nets and follow him.

Nearby, James and John are in the boat with their father, Zebedee, as they mend their nets after a night of fishing. Jesus calls them, and immediately they leave their boat and their nets, and they too follow him.

As I stood by the lake, I wondered about that. Why were these fishermen so willing to leave their nets to follow Jesus? Leave their *nets*? What did it mean for them leave their nets? Those nets were essential for their life’s work. Their little town of Capernaum was not far from the Roman cities of Sephoris and Tiberius, so it would have been easy to sell as many fish as they could catch. The nets were more important than a boat, more important than hired help, more important than cooperation between brothers and friends. Without the nets, regardless of how many fish are in the lake, they wouldn’t catch anything.

The nets consumed the hours when these men weren’t fishing. The ropes and knots had to be inspected and any worn places mended immediately. They had to be kept clean and allowed to dry. Tending and mending the nets took time, effort and commitment.

Most of all, the nets must have been a tangible expression of their identity. They were fishermen, and they couldn’t be who they were without the nets. The way the ropes felt in their hands, the hours spent in the net’s construction and care, the weight of this net compared to a long-ago first net, the movement as it sailed across the water, the pattern it made on the surface as it sank, the fish it delivered to them – the lives of these men were bound up in their nets.

So it astounds me that they left their nets so quickly to follow Jesus! They could have been like Jonah, running the other way, or holding on to a bad attitude even when he finally did go to Nineveh. You need to read the entire book of Jonah – it’s only four short chapters – to get the sense of what a

reluctant prophet he was, and how determined God was to get the message of mercy to the enemies of Israel, in spite of Jonah. God also was trying to get a message to the people of Israel – “I am the God of all people, and I **will** have mercy.” Even on a run-away prophet?

But the fishermen on the shore of Galilee that day didn't ignore Jesus or run away. They took up his invitation. These life-long fishermen turned their backs on the only occupation they had ever known, to walk a road instead of a beach, to listen to words about God instead of the cry of the gulls. Oh, they probably fished occasionally during those years with Jesus, but they were no longer primarily commercial fishermen of Galilee. They were itinerant disciples on an unknown road.

I wonder what took the place of those nets in the rough hands of Peter and Andrew, James and John. As disciples, it seems they used their minds and their commitment to Jesus more than actions of hands and arms and back. And yet, those same hands would bring people to Jesus. Those hands would distribute bread and fish to a huge crowd on the shore of the lake. The strength and courage they developed as fishermen would be needed in the days to come, even though sometimes, according to Mark's gospel, they would be more than a little clueless about what Jesus was really doing.

As they turned from their nets to follow Jesus, their lives turned around. That is the meaning of “repent” – to turn around. It has less to do with feeling sorry for sins than it does with changing your mind and direction to go in a new way. The message of Jesus was simple – now is the time to turn around, for God is near. Andrew and Simon, James and John didn't understand the implications of the message that day by the lake, but their actions demonstrated what they would eventually learn. In those few years with Jesus, they would discover that God's values and priorities are different than those of temple and empire, and that it is possible to live in the way of the radical self-giving love of Jesus.

The fishermen were joined by others, as Jesus called tax collectors, rebels and even women, and I wonder how they ever got along with each other. But they were willing to learn, and in the process, they were woven into the net that would draw people to Jesus. Because of them, we are here

today, and sometimes that just blows me away. These clueless disciples eventually got it right, and they didn't keep it to themselves.

We too are called. Every day Jesus calls us – engineers and accountants, clerks and caregivers, children and teachers and retired people. We are not often called to leave home, or even to leave that which is most important. Sometimes the call is to stay where we are, but look at life from a new perspective, so that we can discover how to live the gospel, the good news of Christ.

As we gather in a community of faith in response to God's call, we become the net – the network of Christ's followers. We are bound together by the forgiveness and grace God offers us and we offer to one another. We are connected by the love and commitment we give to God and receive from the people who also walk this way. Oh, sometimes we get tangled up in knots, or some of our connections to each other are frayed by the friction of too much work or differences of opinion, and so we need to take the time to tend and mend the ties that bind us together. The stronger our net, the more effective we are at "catching people," as Jesus said, although I think we prefer to call it "welcoming people" into this part of Christ's family of faith.

The Good News is that God, who is merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love, is among us. By the love of Christ, we are bound together in a network of faith in God and fellowship in the Spirit. Christ sends us out, not individually, but as a networked community, so that we may all be caught up in the grace and love of God.

Let us pray. Weave us together into your net, O Christ. May we celebrate the ties that bind us to you and to one another. May the Spirit guide us as we go out to serve. Amen.