

FISH STORIES

A Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2018

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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Prone to hyperbole and exaggeration, as a demonstration of mastery over natural elements, as a way of celebrating struggle, scriptural, literary and contemporary voices love fish stories. With countless indigenous traditions and sagas, from *Jonah and the Whale*, to *Moby Dick* and more recently to *The Old Man and the Sea* or the movie *The Perfect Storm*, the sea and its struggles inspire and delight us.

We hear today of Jonah . . . (who) is called upon by Yahweh to travel to Nineveh and warn its residents to repent of their sins or face divine wrath. (Avoiding God's call) Jonah boards a ship to Tarshish. Caught in a storm, he orders his shipmates to cast him overboard, whereupon he is swallowed by a giant fish. Three days later, after Jonah agrees to go to Nineveh, the fish vomits him out onto the shore. Jonah successfully convinces the entire city of Nineveh to repent, but waits outside the city to await its destruction. Yahweh shields Jonah from the sun with a plant, but later sends a worm to cause it to wither. When Jonah complains of the bitter heat, Yahweh rebukes him. and the story ends abruptly and to my mind, confusingly.

In Judaism, the story of Jonah represents the teaching of *teshuva*, which is the ability to repent and be forgiven by God. The word itself means "return" and is one element of atoning for sin in Judaism. Judaism recognizes that everybody sins on occasion, but that people can stop or minimize those occasions in the future by repenting for past transgressions. Thus, the primary purpose of repentance in Judaism is ethical self transformation and restoring one's reputation, not divine purification.

In the New Testament, Jesus calls himself "greater than Jonah" and promises the Pharisees "the sign of Jonah", which is his resurrection. Early Christian interpreters viewed Jonah as a type for Jesus. As Jonah spent three days in the large fish, likewise Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.

So this first fish story reminds us of the struggle to find the right or correct path, and of God's compassion and providence amidst life's most threatening situations. Our psalm picks up the theme:

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
6 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
8 Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. (68:5-8)

Now for fish story #2. Here we meet for the first time Jesus' future disciples. These faithful men (and they were men in this instance) immediately and without hindrance welcome Jesus' invitation to a new life, called into a new service, without reservation. If in the first story, the characters were troubled and inhibited, the opposite is here true.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his

brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (MARK 1:14-20)

Two stories, two different circumstances, same inviting God though seen latterly through the lens of Jesus Christ, who is God's manifestation of love and true life.

Allow me finally, one last fish story. In my teens I attended Oak Bay Junior High in Victoria. My grade nine English teacher was Mr. Jacobi. I was not a keen or insightful student. I had little sense of "reading between the lines" or of imaginative enquiry. So Hemmingway's short novel *The Old Man and the Sea* meant little to me - I now plan to re-read it. Published in 1952 it was the last major work of fiction by Hemmingway that was published during his lifetime. One of his most famous works, it tells the story of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman who struggles with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba. It is a saga of struggle and overcoming adversity. It is nature versus man (sic) story, one of reputation, kinship and physical danger. While not a religious work religious elements punctuate its brief prose. One commentator writes:

(T)he religious overtones of *The Old Man and the Sea* are not peculiar to that book among Hemmingway's works . . . Hemmingway has finally taken the decisive step in elevating what might be called his philosophy of Manhood to the level of a religion.

At one point Hemmingway uses explicit Christian imagery, made evident through his obvious reference to the crucifixion of Christ following (the fisherman's) sighting of the sharks that reads:

"Ay," he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood.

In Hemmingway's novel, the fisherman Santiago returns home with little to show for his efforts apart from survival itself. On the other hand, Jonah is battered about by God, who he finally obeyed, but who rewarded his efforts unevenly and some would say unfairly.

Life feels like that sometimes I must say. The challenge is simply to carry on. To remain committed to those things, those ideals which we value and respect, in others and in and through ourselves – things which Paul urges upon the Philippians,

. . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

They are things worth thinking about and acting upon.

Possibly our prayer is to have some of the enthusiasm of the early disciples sent to fish for people. We may well find however, that storms threaten to destroy what good we can find and access. We find meaning and satisfaction then not in particular outcomes but in a life-vocation which is its own reward.

Thanks be to God.