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“Fishing for Purpose”
A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
January 21, 2018
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10, Psalm 62: 5-12, Mark 1: 14-20

Many of us are waking up on this side of *'tis season to be jolly,*

with the old year neatly tucked away, and with a renewed sense of purpose

and resolve for our relationships, our work, and our health:

our families, our future, our fat and fitness!

But for two of those dearest to me, this new year presents a daunting challenge,

as they have awakened, as if from a dream, perhaps,

with the stark and somewhat painful realization that their life-long careers

are coming to an abrupt end.

My younger brother is one of them, warning me just before Christmas

that Campbell was poised to buy out Snyder-Lance, the cookie company,

and that consequently his career since grad school as

Lance's Assistant Treasurer would probably be eclipsed by someone

higher up the *food chain* within the next three months.

He's not terribly sad about it, he said, having had his fill of corporate America.

But he seriously is wondering what his next steps should be at age 59.

What is his calling at this age? What would give him a sense of purpose?

What is the best use of his gifts and talents in today's world?

Is corporate America still calling, or perhaps something else?

And then there is my best friend from childhood, the daughter of a pediatrician,
and herself, a pediatrician, following in her father's footsteps, and inheriting
many of the families from his practice to continue serving them.

She was called into the corporate office of Novant Health before Thanksgiving
for what she considered to be a normative conversation,
only to find herself walking out of that office with a pink slip in hand,
and an order NOT to contact any of her patients to let them know
that she would no longer be practicing medicine with Novant.

Needless to say, she is devastated. She should have seen it coming, she says,
as she was a single practice physician in a system of managed health care
that prefers the fiscal advantage of larger multi-physician practices.

But she considered the focused attention she was able to give each child,
the particular conversations she was able to have with each parent,
and the continuity of care, all assets in practicing slow medicine

in a fast-paced, fragmented world.

Obviously, she and Novant didn't see eye to eye.

What is her calling at age 64? What would give her a continued sense of purpose?

What is the best use of her gifts and talents in today's world?

Is corporate health care still calling, or perhaps something else?

These two are close to my heart as I read this story of Jesus calling his first disciples,

as are many of you, as you likewise wake up on the other side

of the season to be jolly, perhaps newly-retired or newly-widowed,

or as new parents or empty-nesters, or as patients

saddled with a heavy diagnosis, or perhaps mercifully unsaddled.

Is there a balm *in Galilee*, in this ancient narrative of Jesus' calling of four fishermen,

with power to heal, to guide, to purpose, to restore, to make whole?

Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy Jill Levine, gives me insight

from a Jewish perspective with her translation of the text and commentary.

She notes that Jesus, back in his full humanity here, is at a critical turning point

himself as his cousin and mentor, John, has been arrested and imprisoned.

So Jesus' sense of urgency, or perhaps Mark's sense of urgency for Jesus,

is doubly-compounded, both by his baptismal awakening

to the imminent nearness of the Kingdom of God,
as well as by the shocking absence of his kinsman leader, John, the Baptizer.
Hence Jesus himself is fishing for his own purpose, as he adopts
John's original message with heightened urgency,
"Repent, and believe the *good news*",
(instead of the bad news that just gobsmacked you).

Levine notes that the Greek word for *repent* here, *metanoia*, does not mean
to turn, as in regard to individual sins, but rather it implores a turning
toward God for indications of a future promise, and a promising future.

And the Greek word for *believe* shares the same root with the word for faith (*pistuō*),
which connotes trustworthiness and faithfulness.

She says, "Faith and belief are key terms in almost all texts of the Jesus movement."

(Levine, Amy-Jill. *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 59)

When your back is against the wall, with the present chapter of your life-story ending,
and you're looking for signs and indications of next things, to whom do you turn?

Whom do you follow? Do you follow the Tar Heels, or the Blue Devils, the Panthers,
or the Steelers, Vera Wang or Jimmy Choo, Taylor Swift or Miley Cyrus,

Sean Hannity or Leonard Pitts?

These are all interesting people and nice diversions?

But when you reach what I call a point of grace, to whom do you turn

with your whole inner being, your heart, soul, mind and strength,

for the sea change which you seek? That is the question.

To this, Jesus simply says, "Follow me".

"Follow me, and I will make you fish *for* people," which is how Levine translates

Jesus' words. Our NRSV translates Jesus' words this same way.

So what I hear Jesus saying is this: take what you love to do,

what you are skilled in doing, what you have worked hard to hone and perfect,

in the case of Peter, Andrew, James and John – fishing – and

do it *pro humanitate*, for humanity, for people, for the benefit of people,

for the well-being of people, for the common or greater good

of people, for the people to whom God re-directs you as you re-pent.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002-2012), says,

"Following is to be in the same place as the Master....

Being where Jesus is means being in the company of the people

whose company Jesus seeks and keeps.

Jesus chooses the company of the excluded, the disreputable, the wretched,

the self-hating, the poor, the diseased;

so that is where you are going to find yourself.

If you are going to be where Jesus is, if your discipleship is not intermittent

but a way of being, you will find yourself

in the same sort of company as he is in.”

(Williams, Rowan. *Being Disciples*, p. 11)

That means you might leave your nets, leave your boats, leave your mending,
even leave your family and your co-workers, but you do not leave your
life-learned fishing skills, or accounting skills, or medical skills behind,
as you step out into the wider world as Jesus beacons you to follow him anew.

It might mean, for example, that whereas you formerly confined yourself

to fresh-water fishing, Jesus now calls you to consider salt-water fishing, as well.

Furthermore, since the primary use of fish was as food in the Bible,

I can't overlook Jesus' direct intimation to feed people either,

both literally and spiritually,

as we flash forward and notice that all four gospels will relate
the story of Jesus telling his disciples, “You give them something to eat!,”

when they are faced with a meager crowd of five thousand,

and a mere handful of loaves and fish.

Nor can we overlook the last conversation between Peter, the fisherman,

and the risen Lord, where Jesus treats his disciples to a breakfast

of fish and toast on the beach, and then stage whispers to Peter,

so that other fishermen might overhear, "If you love me, feed my sheep."

To fish *for* people, as Jesus suggests, might mean to use all of our gifts and talents, experiences and learnings for the greater good of under-served humanity, and it also might mean to use them to provide for the most basic needs of people.

Who can say? Pass me a blessing bag, please.

There was a wonderful feature story in *The Herald Sun* two weeks ago, about John Williams, the 2017 Principal of the Year in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, now serving as Principal of Phoenix Academy, an alternative school for students struggling with academic and behavioral issues. Williams, himself, came from hard-scrabble beginnings, having grown up poor as one of five children, on a farm in Greene County, NC, with an abusive alcoholic father who disappeared when he was 10. And, although Williams vowed as a child never to touch alcohol himself, or ever to leave his children like that, he still struggled with his own behavior and academic performance throughout junior high and high school, just barely graduating.

Nevertheless, after serving a stint in the Air Force in South Korea, Williams was visiting home in Greene County, where he dropped off his resume

at the School Board there on a whim – and to his surprise, they hired him!
From that entry level position, Williams worked his way into an assistant principal
job, which launched a career into school administration,
subsequently serving at Chewing Middle School here in Durham,
as well as at Riverside High School, where he worked under one of my
favorite Administrators, Principal Jim Key.

Williams fine-tuned his skills at working with students, at caring for students,
at encouraging students, at counseling students,
while working in the traditional public schools.

But he was called out of that population to use his gifts and talents,
experiences and learnings to serve the non-traditional students at Phoenix,
the last chance school for many students
who have been expelled from other schools.

“I think he’s a natural fit for a nontraditional school,” Jim Key said.

“He’s the right fit, has the right heart. *It’s almost like he was born and made
for where he is right now.*”

The hard-learned lessons from Greene County, from his military background,
from his work as a mental health counselor and his experience on the job
have all prepared Williams to “fish” for children some would consider
to be problem children.

“My children here aren’t problem children,” Williams says later in the article.

“They’re children with problems.

When you approach it from that perspective, you’re constantly trying

to come up with creative ways to help them work through

whatever issues they may be dealing with.”

(Childress, Greg. *The Herald Sun*. “CHCCS Educator Uses Hard-Learned

Lessons to Help Troubled Students”. Jan. 7, 2018)

And I think that’s the kind of calling and the kind of purpose that Jesus lays

upon the hearts and minds of those who follow him as disciples today.

Have faith and believe in the good news about people, not the bad news;

see their full potential, their untapped potential,

the oppressed and suppressed potential in people,

I hear Jesus saying across the centuries.

Follow me, to find and welcome my children, my people who may feel excluded

from my blessings.

And leave your nets, your boats, your mending, even your family behind,

but by all means, take all the skills and talents and lures in your tackle box,

and seek company, keep company, and make better the company

of the people whom Jesus still seeks and keeps, and loves. Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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