

21 January 2018
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Sanctity of Life Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“The Fisher of Men”

Text: Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Follow me, and I will make you become fishermen of men.

Who was the first fisherman of men? Was it Simon? Was it Andrew? Mark, in his usual pithy way, makes it sound like Jesus called them together, at the same time. John gives us a little more detail, telling us that Jesus called Andrew first, and Andrew went and got his brother Simon. Andrew gets the nod historically, too, as his is always the first saint day commemorated every church year.

So the answer? Well, it was neither of them.

The answer I want to tell you is that the first fisher of a man wasn't even a man! That the first fisher of a man was the great fish that fished Jonah out of the sea and swallowed him, after Jonah refused to go to Nineveh and preach the Word God told him to preach. That's a good story and would be a good answer. But no, it wasn't the great fish either.

In fact, for the answer, you have to go all the way back, to the very beginning, and realize the real, the true, the first fisherman of men *is God Himself*. And we could be more specific and say the Son of God himself. The Son of God even before He took on human flesh in His incarnation.

For it was God, God the Son, who fished Adam and Eve out of their hiding in the Garden and hooked them with His forgiveness and His promise to make right what they had messed up. To send a Saviour, which would be He Himself.

It was God, God the Son, who fished Abram out of his idolatry in the land of Ur of the Chaldees.

It was God, God the Son, who fished Israel out of their slavery in Egypt.

It was God, God the Son, who fished for Israel time and again throughout the time of the Judges, when they kept falling away from Him.

It was God, God the Son, who sent Jonah to fish for the Ninevites, as we read in the Old Testament reading, and who worked through Jonah's word to catch them.

And with the word of all the other prophets, too.

And then, in the fullness of time, God, God the Son, now in human flesh and given the name Jesus, comes to Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and eventually to eight more, and says: ***Follow me, and I will make you become fishermen of men.*** Or in other words: You will become like me. You will do what I have been doing from the very beginning. I will now use you as I used others.

For that's what "***follow me***" meant - it was an apprenticeship, of sorts. They would go with Jesus wherever He went. They would listen to Him, learn from Him, imitate Him, and eventually do what He did.

So they followed. And they saw and heard Jesus fishing and catching men, women, and children, and give them life.

They saw Jesus go on His own *March for Life* to a town called Nain and raise a widow's only son back to life.

They saw Jesus love children and not try to get rid of them, but call them, welcome them, and bless them.

They saw Jesus love and welcome and give life to people no one else wanted, people whom the world thought they'd be better off without - like Mary Magdalene, from whom He expelled seven demons.

They saw Jesus love and heal and give life to people with birth defects, like the man born blind.

They saw Jesus not avoid, but visit and give life to the sick and elderly - like Peter's mother-in-law.

They saw Jesus feed and give life to the hungry, over 5,000 at once, one time.

They saw Jesus give life by casting the demons out of a man which were trying to kill him, casting him into fire and otherwise abusing him.

They saw Jesus give life to a woman who maybe today would be given drugs to end her life of suffering, for bleeding for twelve long years was she.

They saw Jesus not ignore or pass by the homeless, but cleanse the lepers and give them life again.

And on and on we could go from just what we learn from the Gospels, which, John tells

us, is just a fraction of all that Jesus did (John 21:25). But it's all about life. Jesus giving life. Fishing for men, women, and children drowning in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death, and giving them life.

And we could add to this list that the Son of God has fished you out of your idolatry, out of your sin and death and given you life. Through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, Jesus has come to you, dead in sin, and made you alive in Him.

And on this Sanctity of Life Sunday, **that's the Epiphany for us today** - that Jesus is the fisherman of men **for life**. For fish - they're caught alive and then wind up in the frying pan. But we're in the frying pan of sin and condemnation already, and Jesus fishes us out **for life**.

Not that it's easy. Fishing often takes patience. And you can fish in different ways. Sometimes for one fish at a time, with a hook. Sometimes for many fish at a time, with a net. And sometimes you catch and sometimes you don't. The Spirit of God, working through the Word of God, works when and where He wills, as Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:8). But work He does.

The thing is . . . He's not the only one fishing. Satan is, too. For just as Jesus wants every life for Himself, so too does satan want every life for himself. To lure us and catch us and put us back into the frying pan of sin and condemnation. And He's good at His job. He caught Adam and Eve in the beginning, and he caught the entire city of Nineveh - not a small city; three days journey across! Until God, the Son of God, went fishing there. Fishing with a net named Jonah, who proclaimed: ***Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*** And God caught a lot of fish that day.

So some years later, satan tried the same tactic . . . sort of. He went fishing for Jesus. ***Yet forty days, and Jesus shall be overthrown!*** might have been the thought going through his mind as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. But Jesus did not take satan's bait. Jesus would die a condemned sinner's death on the cross - but not because satan caught Him, but to crush satan's head, as He had promised Adam and Eve in the Garden. Not to be swallowed by death, but to swallow up death forever (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). And so win and provide life for all.

And so we prayed today for that life, for us and for all people. For we prayed: *Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us* (Collect for Epiphany 3). Now, that prayer doesn't use the word life, but it could have! For we could just as easily have said, instead of *to heal and defend us*, this: *to give us life*. **Heal us** from the poison of sin with Your forgiveness, to give us life. **Defend us** from the satanic fisher that we not be caught by him and die, but keep us in Your life. **Stretch forth the hand of Your majesty** - the one at Your right hand, Your Son, Jesus! - and just as You have been from the beginning, catch us and all

people for life.

And so God, the Son of God, is doing. Healing, defending, giving life. Simon, Andrew, James, John, and eight others were caught, then followed, and then fished. Those who came after them did the same. And down through the ages to us. That *all* may have life. The twelve had to learn that, and so do we. What Jesus taught them, what Jesus showed them, that every life is worth the life of the Son of God. For He laid down His life for all, none excepted. Satan thinks a bit differently; that every life is a life to consume. For *him* to consume.

So, in our world today, where do you think we are? Thinking more like Jesus, or more like satan? That every life is worth the life of the Son of God and so our life, or do we consume? Or are there are criteria to determine who's worth it and who's not; who has value and who doesn't? Perhaps we're somewhere in the middle, but . . . trending right? Trending wrong? And what's the criteria? It keeps changing and seems to get more complicated every day.

Perhaps that is a warning sign to us, when things get complicated. Because Jesus' criteria is easy: every life, bar none, worth His own.

And so it is. And you and I, we've been caught, not because we met some criteria of worthiness or value - NO! But purely by grace. All gift. All God.

And so it is, too, with our fishing. Every life worth the life of the Son of God. So we'll keep filling baby bottles during Lent, we'll keep marching through the streets of DC every year, we'll keep visiting and caring for the elderly and homebound, we'll look at disruptive children not as nuisances, but as those who need our care, we'll have compassion on the disabled and homeless, we'll speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, and we'll speak *against* the consumption of life, whether in the womb of out of the womb; the youngest of the young or the oldest of the old, or anywhere in between. We'll keep fishing for life. We'll keep fishing with life.

Does it make a difference? Bottles filled year after year, 45 years of marching, speaking to those who don't want to listen. Does it make any difference at all? **Yes.** But that's a faith answer. We may never get to see, the nets may always seem empty. But the Spirit works when and where He wills, and we rely on the promise of God. We do the fishing, He will do the catching. Whether you're a blue collar fisherman (like Simon), a white collar tax collector (like Matthew), or a renegade prophet still wiping the fish slime from his arms. Just as He caught you, so He will catch others.

And if we're rebellious, like Jonah, or reluctant, or just plain sinful, it is not a great fish that God sends to swallow us and change us - He now, instead, gives His Body and Blood for us to swallow, to change us with the forgiveness and life we need. That with *the*

kingdom of God at hand, here, *literally* in our hands, we ***repent*** and ***believe***. We repent and receive. We repent and live.

For that is why Jesus came. For Life. Or as He would later say: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy - to consume. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (John 10:10). And so it is. And from Garden to cross to glory, He won't stop.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.