

1-21-2018

Epiphany 3 Series B 2018

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Recommended Citation

Brandt, Phillip L., "Epiphany 3 Series B 2018" (2018). *Sunday's Sermon*. 58.
https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_archives_sundaysermon/58

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 21

Last week Jesus calls his disciples. This week, he does it again, this time in the famous scene in which he summons Peter, Andrew, James, and John from their nets. Of course the careful reader of John's Gospel account notices that this is not the first time Jesus has encountered these men. This was no random or chance meeting, but Jesus was seeking out the disciples of the now imprisoned John the Baptist, the very men he had spent some time with in the scene which John the Apostle describes. (I refer to the verses immediately before last week's pericope.)

But there is more to notice in Mark's telling when we compare it to John's account of Jesus gathering disciples. Mark has a decided emphasis here, an emphasis on authority. John had called Jesus the Lamb who took away the sins of the whole world. It is true, that is a sort of authority, but the use of the lamb imagery suggests sacrifice and the sacrificial system. Mark plays much more with the simple idea of authority.

I take this from the section which immediately follows this passage and it is worth spending a few minutes dealing with that, especially since our next Sundays will spend some time there. Mark makes frequent use of a technique known as the triplet. He lays three things side by side and they speak in a sort of rhetorical tension with each other. They will say something slightly different and that difference become much more noticeable when you look at all three of them. It is a little like looking at three things which are all green. If you just have one of them, you will say the thing is green, but when you have three shades of green next to each other, you will notice how dark, vibrant, or rich each green color is.

In this chapter, right after he calls the disciples, Jesus does three miracles. We will see one of them next week in the Gospel. Jesus exorcises a demoniac in the synagogue, heals Peter's mother-in-law, and cleanses a leper. But what gets compared and highlighted is not the healing so much as the authority of Christ. Twice, in the midst of these healings, Jesus orders demons to silence. They obey. The third time, he orders a healed leper to silence, using the same words. The Leper disobeys and goes out to tell all.

Often Mark will insert an element between two of the members of the triplet, and those are frequently important. He does so here. Between the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the healing of the leper Jesus gets up early and goes out of the village. The disciples are looking for him, find him praying outside of town. They urge him to return and he urges them to follow him to all the towns of Galilee "because that is why I came out."

Here is where Phil gets a little out there on this one. I think this is all about authority. I had a student a few years ago who read this section and was amazed that Jesus did not zap that ex-leper with a lightning bolt for disobedience. Indeed, nothing is said about this blatant disregard for a clear command by Jesus. The leper is not even criticized for disobeying the command which had constrained the demons.

We cannot definitely say what Mark's audience was. Traditionally it was the Christians of Rome persecuted under Nero's brief but brutal persecution. Others have suggested that this was actually written for the Christian community during the run up to the Jewish revolt in 68 AD. What no one disputes is that Mark's audience were very much afraid. Persistently Mark will introduce the element of fear into the storyline. Fearful people are often very quiet, and usually that is because the people who are making them afraid want it that way. Persecutions are all about silencing this "dangerous movement."

I believe Mark is saying something about this. In the latter part of the chapter Jesus says clearly that he came to preach to all the villages. Then in the very next verses he tells a guy not to tell. There is a little tension there. Which pronouncement of the authority (Jesus) should one listen to? It seems that there is a conflict in the orders. The healed leper tells anyway, even though the authoritative figure has said he should not. I think Mark is suggesting that when you have conflicting authorities, Jesus says "tell" and the persecutors say "shut-up" one should tell. I think he is actually prioritizing the authority to proclaim and spread the kingdom here, even within Jesus' own words.

This is important for our text because telling is the job of the disciples. They will be fishers of men. Their tackle, the hooks and nets of their new trade, are not physical constraints and enticements. They fish with words graciously spoken, deeds of love, and a community engaged with the world around it.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty and everlasting God...this is the second week this phrase has led off our prayer. Epiphany has a strong emphasis of laying side by side the divine and the human, the great mystery of the incarnation, hence the glorious attributes of God are emphasized. If we down play this, we make the incarnation smaller or less important. The incarnation is highlighted when we remember that it is the Lord of heaven and earth, the mighty and glorious creator of all who walked those dusty streets of Palestine those many years ago.

But then we run right into our infirmities, contrasted with God's great power and eternity. We beg God look on these mercifully. Of course God has a special insight into our human infirmities, doesn't he? He has himself experienced them. He has been tempted as we are tempted. He knows fatigue and has wept at the grave of a friend.

Then we are back to the divinity. We want him to stretch for the hand of his majesty to heal and defend us. This harkens us back to the way the OT describes the great exodus event, in which he brought out the children of Israel with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. Now we pray for

liberty but it is a liberty from our sin, our enemy, this broken, deadly world. We pray for the healing and the defense which we need.

I think the preacher will be naturally drawn to that phrase “the hand of your majesty.” What is that? It heals us, according to the prayer, but it sounds like a power thing, doesn’t it which always brings along a tinge of fear for us. I wonder what our people hear when that phrase gets used, if they even pay attention to it. How will we even touch that and avoid the snare of a theology of glory?

Readings

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶ *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.* ⁷ *And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water,* ⁸ *but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.* ⁹ *Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”*

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

The word for “relent” in the last verse is the same word regularly used for “repent.” In Hebrew “Shub” it suggests that God changed his mind, that this is not a totally deterministic world. The picture here is of a God who is in relationship with His creation, a relationship that is not always predetermined. There is room in here for God to be disappointed and there is room in there for God to change his mind about something. How an omniscient and omnipotent being does that is a mystery, but the best answer we can is that this sounds like love. Yes, God can change his mind, he did about me! At the same time we have the word of God that says that he does not change. The love does not change. The judgement of God about me, that I am a sinner who deserves only death and damnation, that certainly has changed in Christ.

Yes, we are on Lutheran ground here, tension, sinner and saints we can live with a tension in theology without resolving it. It is hard, but it is also sweet and from that tension comes a great deal of energy. In that tension is found the Gospel itself.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time – there is a great sermon in that little phrase. As the prayer notes, God is everlasting, you see, he outlasts the stubborn sin of man. Jonah had responded to God's call to go to Nineveh by running the other way. We don't know where exactly Tarshish is to be found in the ancient world, but the fact that Jonah got in a boat means he was heading roughly west and Nineveh is east.

I grew up thinking that Jonah's flight was due to the fact he was afraid of the Ninevites. I remember a children's book that portrayed them rather as savages. But later reading of the text has changed my opinion about that. Jonah was not afraid of the Ninevites; rather, he fled because he knew God too well. He knew what God had in mind, he knew that God wanted to forgive those miserable Ninevites and he thought that if he did not preach and they did not hear to repent, they would not repent and the judgment of God would fall on them. This was not a fearful man running away, it was an angry, hateful man running away and in his running he thought he was calling down terrible judgment on the people he despised. He wanted them to burn.

Of course that all led to the fish incident. Jonah has learned that he is not in control of this. If God could send an overgrown carp to rescue his rebellious prophet, perhaps he could send a reluctant prophet to rescue the people of Nineveh. Jonah has had a powerful lesson in who is in charge of this situation but also in the gracious and merciful love of God. Three days he has spent in that fish contemplating and praying. A three day stint which of course is also a prophecy of Christ's three days in the tomb (Matthew 12:27-39.)

Now, coughed upon a beach, probably still smelling rather badly of fish and perhaps covered in a little seaweed, Jonah looks up from the sand to see the familiar face of his Lord. As I envision this scene I rather see the Logos squatting down next to the coughing and soaked Jonah and smiling at him. "Jonah, are you ready to go to Nineveh yet?" The Bible doesn't tell us why he went, but one can imagine that the idea of another three days in the belly of a fish were not terribly appealing. His later actions suggest that these were begrudgingly given not born of a love for the Ninevites. He went, but I have to think that when he stood up in the market of Nineveh and proclaimed the destruction of the city he must have whispered. I wondered if he mumbled a little.

He did not want them to hear and repent. He was an unwilling messenger. However he proclaimed it, and perhaps the whole fish thing caused him to shout it out loud lest he be returned as the entrée to some other beastie, we can say that he did not want it to work. But it did work. The Word of God has a power all its own, even when the messenger is not 100% behind what he is doing. (Does this speak to a lot of preachers who ascend to pulpits today?) Jonah goes a day's journey into the city, half-heartedly preaches a message repentance, and the people believe him. The message spreads through the people of Nineveh. Were they especially ready for the Word? Apparently, and they responded to it.

I have to take a pause here. I believe that we often get our job and God's job totally upside down in this regard. We think that we need to make sure that folks are ready for the Word, but that is God's job. He is very good at preparing people for his Word. What he has given us to do is to proclaim it. There is a point where it takes a great burden off the preacher when he remembers that God is responsible for what happens after I speak it.

The message goes all the way to the king. That is a really interesting thought. The word we preach on Sunday might just go that high and that far. The king hears what Jonah has said. He probably was not there which tells us that the message of Jonah was spreading from person to person in the city.

I am reminded of a story told by a pastor I met in Hawaii. He was approached by the father of a pair of students at his school to offer up a prayer at this man's retirement party. This man had not ever been active in the congregation, but his kids went to school there. Being a military town, this was not unusual, so the pastor agreed and was given a time and place to show up. What was unusual was what happened next. He arrived at the appointed place, was escorted by a pair of MP's to the Arizona Memorial and ushered into that important place and discovered a room filled with gold braid, high-ranking officers of the U. S. Navy. At this point he honestly has no idea who this guy is who is retiring. He looks at the program and realizes that the man who asked him to pray is one of the commanders of the pacific fleet. Imagine his surprise at this point when the retiring commander introduces him as "my pastor." What the preacher did not know was that the commander had been downloading his sermons every week from the church website. They formed the basis of a bible study he led every Monday for his staff. Some of the staff told him this story after the retirement ceremony. For years he had been preaching to senior members of the Navy command in the pacific. He did not know it.

The king hears Jonah's message, tears his clothes and puts on the sackcloth and ashes of repentance. You might want to remember this in Lent when we are urged to put ashes on our head. The whole city fasts and wonders if God will relent. God does relent. There is mercy for sinners with God. He is full of compassion and grace. He heals our infirmities and takes up our sins to himself.

In the next chapter we see Jonah rather miffed about that. But that is another sermon. Jonah comes across throughout this book just as foul as the Ninevites, and certainly just as out of step with God. He looks like the Pharisees in Luke 15. When we read the first verses of chapter four we learn that he did not fear the Ninevites but he feared the mercy of God, he did not want them to be forgiven and he knew that God was a forgiving sort of God. What are we afraid that God will do?

Psalm 62

For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.

² He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

³ How long will all of you attack a man
to batter him,
like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

⁴ They only plan to thrust him down from his high position.
They take pleasure in falsehood.

They bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. Selah

⁵ For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.

⁶ He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

⁷ On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

¹⁰ Put no trust in extortion;
set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:

that power belongs to God,

¹² and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.

For you will render to a man
according to his work.

This psalm is one of my favorites. It confronts me in my arrogance and self-conceit and won't let me retain my firmly held sense of self-reliance. My salvation comes from God. I will shut my mouth and wait in silence. For God alone is my hope and salvation.

I wonder who the enemies are that plot against the psalmist. He sounds a little paranoid. But I believe all of us have these enemies who would undo us. Paul did. Just read Romans 7 and discover that some of them were inside his own head and heart. Our evil foe surely wants us to fall. Our sinful flesh conspires against us. The worldly forces of economy, age, and entropy would render us worthless and feeble. They speak sweetly but inwardly they curse.

The psalm ends by developing the first verses. God alone is the our hope, we must wait for him and his time and his pleasure. It is foolish to trust in any human, even myself. Power and the ability to save is God's and God's alone.

I Corinthians 7:29-31 (32-35) Paul's words today are embedded in a rather strange conversation. I have included some of the context.

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

The point in this is good order and undivided devotion. Those things are impossible when we have our life tied up in knots about this sort of stuff. At Paul's time they were worked up about marriage and whether they should be married. What is it in our time? Are we worked up about who is president, about our retirement statements, who is getting married and to whom? What is

distracting us, what is giving us anxiety? Paul urges us not to be anxious about these things. Jesus is coming and these things will pass away. They are not the real story. The real story is about a cross and an eternal life that was given to us in our baptism.

Paul had received more than one communication from the people in Corinth about the problems there and the first part of the letter seems to be running through their concerns in sort of a catalogue. In chapter seven it appears that some were withholding sex from their spouse because they thought the end of the world was nigh. You can imagine that the mission from the folks in Cloe's house was conducted with a certain sense of urgency in that situation. Others were not allowing their daughters to be married because they thought it would be better to go to heaven on the last day as a virgin. I imagine that there was at least one young woman who wanted to change her father's mind.

The words we have here come from the end of this discussion. There are of course a couple of ways that this gets read, depending on the circumstances and the tradition of the reader. The Roman Catholic will tend to focus on the part about how the unmarried person is better able to serve God and therefore find something of a justification for the practice of clerical celibacy. Of course the Lutheran will turn to verse 35 and notice that Paul is very careful "not to lay a restraint" on the good people of Corinth. One cannot say that it is required – "So there!" to the Catholic who demands it.

But both of these combatants I think miss the larger point. Paul's words were to free them from anxiety and were intended for their benefit, so that their devotion to the Lord would be undivided. That seems to be the real point of Paul's words. The end is near and he is trying to relieve their anxiety. Does that sound strange to you? Most end of the world preachers are trying to raise your anxiety level, and Paul wants to bring it down. That would suggest that he has a different eschatology at work than most of us are familiar with.

This eschatology lets him see everything, even marriage differently because it is a resurrection, a new life, a new kingdom breaking in which is bigger even than marriage. That is a pretty profound thing for a Jewish guy to say at the time. They knew that marriage had been instituted prior to the fall and a great deal of their faith was built on the idea of familial continuity and multiplication. To get married and have children was central to the Jewish ethos and worship. The messiah would come from one of those families. But Paul asserts that the present form of the world is passing away. Notice not "will pass away," but this eschaton has already broken in and the world is in a state of passing away, it is literally dying.

For the ascetically minded of the first and later centuries this would mean a radical renunciation of the Jewish norm. That would translate into a devotion to celibacy in the early and medieval church, but would also be the same motive for Luther to take a wife. For Luther the passing away of the world would mean the passing away of this façade of celibacy which had been constructed in the medieval period. For Paul and for Luther and for Christians of every generation, the real message is that this world is passing away, replaced by a new heaven and a

new earth. That means that everything, even our most intimate relationships are seen in a different light.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

The first line of the text tells us these events take place is after John the Baptist’s imprisonment. That means Jesus calls these disciples after the events recorded in John’s Gospel of last week in which the Baptist has been pointing out Jesus to his disciples. The salient point perhaps is that this is not the first time that Jesus has met these men. They have heard the Baptist point out Jesus to them and so Jesus call is not entirely out of the blue. It also suggests that Peter, Andrew, James, and John may have been religiously fervent men. They had already dropped their nets and followed the Baptist as his disciples. I only say that because I have heard more than one preacher tell this story as if it is a miracle – the fishermen simply drop their nets and follow Jesus, miraculously called and empowered to heed that call. That is a miracle, but these men may have already had a relationship with Jesus and may have been identified by him as men who were particularly open to this vocation.

That can still be preached, mind you, and indeed one could argue that Mark wants you to see just such a miraculous call, but the preacher needs to be aware that a parishioner who has taken his injunction to read the Bible to heart will perhaps be ready to point this out.

Again, as we saw last week, the story is of Jesus gathering people to himself. Depending on how you preached last week, the gathering nature of God might not sustain two sermons in row and the preacher of the Gospel lesson will want to most likely focus on the words of Jesus. Here there is a really interesting little bit of Greek that might just be fun for a sermon.

Look carefully at the summation of Jesus message in verse 15 our reading. Notice carefully the tenses of the verbs and compare that with the preaching of John the Baptist and the care with which the Gospel writers treat this. Greek has some rather peculiar and specific things that it can do with verbs. What we think of temporally, they think of more in terms of the quality of the action. This is perhaps the easiest to explain with the sequence of imperatives we all remember from running races as a child. When we are starting a race, we don’t have a different form for the three imperatives the race starter uses: On your mark...get set...Go! But Greek does notice

a difference. The getting ready part of that sequence is in one tense and the “Go!” would be in another tense.

What is interesting is that John’s preaching is all in the tense of “on your mark...get set” and when Jesus says much the same words, “Repent and believe” those imperatives are in a different tense, they are in the “Go!” tense. The Greek was not so much interested in when the action took place as it was in the nature of the imperative, the urgency or the immediacy of the command. “On your mark” simply directs the runners to take their position at the starting line. It implies that this is the time to do something but it expects the action to start. But it does not clearly delineate an exact moment when the action is supposed to take place. The same is true for “set.” But “Go!” starts the timer clicking, the race has begun, the runner shoot out of their blocks and speed to their finish line.

Likewise Jesus’ words indicate that the time is fulfilled, the preaching of the Baptist and those prophets who have gone before has accomplished its task. “Go!” he shouts as he enjoins the generation of his time and our time to repent and believe that the Kingdom is here, not near, but here.

For the preacher this can have some interesting homiletical application. The Epiphany reveals the incarnation of God, he is in the flesh; that makes this time and this flesh, this reality, sacred and urgent. God has deigned to be a part of this world, to run the human race with us and for us, and that makes the running of our race different and purposeful and a race we run with diligence, effort, speed, and with eyes fixed on the goal.

Paul has this fixation on the goal in mind in the Epistle lesson. And it is the eyes fixed on the goal that God is trying to inculcate in his recalcitrant prophet Jonah in the Old Testament lesson. The kingdom of God is here, right here, right now. We err gravely if we think that the sole goal of the Christian is heaven. The goal of the Christian is the kingdom of God, and that kingdom is both present and future. Jesus has bestowed the authority to forgive sins upon his people and charged them to go out into this world and forgive sins. That is a kingdom authority which does not wait for some future date. I think it is also important to remember that He did not charge us to build buildings or form nice little groups unless those things are furthering the goal of the preaching of this forgiveness, this kingdom of God in the moment.

God actualizes that kingdom in word and sacrament, in absolution and supper every Sunday. The result is that we bring that same kingdom to our homes, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. This is what it means to be a fisher of men.

The audience to which Mark wrote would have been afraid of following Christ, a fear of persecution which seems to have been the genesis of the Gospel account itself.

What is the call that God issues to the people of our congregations today? How is it the same as Jonah’s vocation and how is it different? How is it like the call which is given to the disciples and how is it different? Every Christian has a call from God, issued in baptism, to be the child of

God in this place. Each of us is called to be a forgiver of sins, a teller of this good news. Christ is not just the savior of me, he is the savior of the world and my neighbor needs to hear about it.

Do we make a distinction between believers and disciples of Christ? Can we admit that some folks hear, believe in Jesus, will go to heaven, but are not disciples? Do we challenge our members to think about discipleship but don't lay on them the burden of "you must be like them..."

It might be helpful to remember that Peter also will stumble and fall, he will deny Christ and be restored by Jesus after the resurrection. He is very Jonah like in that. Our people also struggle with this command, it is not an easy thing to hear and obey. We have a promise from God that he does use these flawed servants that we are. The call comes to us.

- 1. God calls fearful, weak, and foolish people*
- 2. God equips them with what they need*
- 3. God uses their words and deeds to accomplish his kingdom task.*

Too often people think they need to have a prepared sermon to obey this call. But in fact, God is calling us to a living and loving relationship with people, both within the congregation and with those outside it. The fellowship is integral to the outreach.

Law

1. There are a lot of folks out there with whom I really would rather not spend an eternity. In fact, I would rather that some of them not show up at the next voters meeting, or perhaps the next family gathering. There might be one I really hope gets that job out of state and moves out of my neighborhood. The divine injunction to love everyone sounds like such a good idea but is pretty miserable in practice.
2. God is in control and I would rather have a little more say about things, especially when we consider #1 above. But God has ways of getting his stuff done which often involve a substantial amount of my inconvenience and pain. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, not exactly the luxury of Tarshish's best accommodations. My father would resist the call to become a pastor until one day he got up from the Wisconsin soil where he lay stunned and looked at the smoking ruins of his tractor just struck by lightning and he said, "Alright, God, I'll go to the seminary."
3. The nearness of the kingdom of God is not really a good thing in some respects. It forces me out of my life of complacency and comfort and changes everything. I don't like change that much. I would rather stay 30 and skip this whole aging thing. I don't like the sorts of changes I have been seeing in my 401k and IRA statements. But fishermen are not left to their boats and nets and I am not left to this earthly life.

4. Change frightens me, especially cosmic changes. The people of Corinth to whom Paul wrote were all worked up about change and they were afraid. That fear led them to say and do some rather odd things. How much of my life is not a reflection of my fears instead of my hopes?
5. God has something for me to be and do. There is work to be done, fish to catch. And he has sent me. I don't have enough time as it is. I really cannot afford another job, especially one which pays so little.

Gospel

1. God loves all the stinky people too. What is more, he has taken this stinky sinner and washed him in the waters of baptism and begun a profound transformation in his life. That means I can see my fellow human being with different eyes, not as they have been and may still be, but in light of what God will make of them and the beauty he has always wanted for them, just as I can begin to see that same perfection and beauty in my own future. Without God, such love of self and other is utterly impossible, but with God, such love is not only possible, it is the necessary conclusion.
2. God's control is always the loving control of one who knows more than I do and whose wisdom far exceeds my own. What I experience as painful and wearisome I can lay in his hands and know that he works for my good and the good of others. Jonah's reluctant preaching resulted in the conversion of Nineveh and my father hesitant steps into ministry would go onto a long and distinguished career as a pastor, the baptisms of hundreds of people, the founding of congregations, the confirmation and communion of thousands.
3. The old sinner wants things to stay the same because he cannot imagine anything better, but God gives me the eyes of faith which can imagine real and positive improvement and change. To spend an eternity as I was when I was thirty would not be a good thing, in fact, it would be rather hellish. God's plans are so much bigger than mine and this means I get to imagine along with him. The presence of the kingdom thrills the new man; he sees the potentiality for kingdom events in every moment, in every celebration and crisis. God's kingdom is here! Isn't that exciting!?
4. God sets my fear at ease by focusing my attention on the goal and the end of this whole thing. I don't need to listen to the prophet who would tell me to radically misshape my life, whether that be sexually or economically or devotionally. But at the same time, radical changes in those areas can also be occasions for God to work wonderful things. Paul would renounce marriage and the kingdom would be blessed. Peter would be married and the kingdom would be blessed. Countless monastics have taken vows of poverty and the kingdom has been blessed. The Lutheran folks who founded Briggs and

Stratton engines in Wisconsin made lots of money and today fund all sorts of kingdom projects throughout the state, and the kingdom is blessed by their business acumen as well. I no longer need to let fear be the motivator for my change, but rather the love of God and the celebration of his gifts to me become the occasion for my life and its decisions.

5. The kingdom's work is not part-time, it is true, it is a full time vocation, but is not the sort of thing which replaces everything else in life. It rather works its way into the vocation and life to which we have been called. Can one sweep floors in the kingdom of God, yes, if the smile one offers to the co-worker, the words of comfort and praise and peace are part of the job too, each of them an opportunity for the kingdom to be present.

Sermon Ideas

1. Casting the Nets – Fishers of Men (Gospel and OT - That the hearer, integrated into the fabric of the congregation, would enter their worlds of work, leisure, home, and community as agents of God's kingdom in this world)

When we think of fishing today, we tend to envision a man in waders, his fly rod in hand, artistically placing that hand tied fly into just the right spot upstream from that little pool where the big trout lies waiting. We think of a man with a fishing pole and a lure, bait and spinners. But such an image lays a tremendous burden on the fisherman. He has to have the right color of lure, the proper bait. He must put that fly in just the right spot. It is a contest between the fisherman and a cagey fish who has thus far eluded all the fishermen before me. But such an image is alien to the world of fishing in the first century. These were commercial fishermen, they fished with a net, at night because it worked better. The fishing was more a matter of repetition and accident than real skill on the part of the fishermen. He threw the net out and drew it in. The fish was not necessarily attracted to any bait, although sometimes it appears they used a light to attract the fish to the boat. This has real implications for Jesus' words to us today that we also have been made into fishers of men. He is casting a net, not a lure. The net is us, the members of this parish, cast into this community every week. But a net with holes in it, is not very effective, a net whose mesh is not tightly woven lets the catch through. So Jesus says the kingdom of God is here, right now, in this place. He makes the kingdom of God present in this place and out there in any place where this week might find you. The first thing it does among us is bind us together into an effective net, united not by bonds of human affection, but the bonds of God's love. We see in the story of Jonah that God loves people that we might find surprising, even repugnant. That is why when the absolution is spoken we never say, "I forgive you all your sins, except..." It is this universal and potent statement, all of them, for all of us, they are taken by Christ, and now I see the sinner next to me very differently and see the sinner in the mirror very

differently. Thus united in the love of Christ, we are cast into this city. Whom will we meet today or tomorrow? Will it be the co-worker, the friend, the fellow student or neighbor? They all become a moment for this kingdom to show up, for the net to gather, as we take the forgiveness and the unity, the fellowship and the love we experience here and find ourselves in places to live it and love it out there. But remember, you are not along in this. You are only effective as a community, a whole net cast into this lake. Rely on them too, let them help.

Have a care in this – we are not gathering butts into the pew, but we are gathering people into the kingdom. God brings folks to our Church, we are the people in relationship with them and through us God might in fact do that. Perhaps we gather this week to tell the stories of how God used us this week to be the Gospel witness this week; it might not mean someone came to church. That is hard for institutions to deal with. We need members, those members give money, that money pays salaries, funds ministry, even keeps the power company from shutting off the lights. But that cannot be our motive for this sort of work or it simply won't be the kingdom we are preaching.

At the same time we cannot lose sight of the fact that God is calling people into a relationship, a relationship which is expressed in the Body of Christ, his Church. It is a good thing, indeed a Godly thing, to be a member of a visible expression of Christ's body. The Church is not perfect, but it is still the very body of Christ. It is a hard tension to keep, but it is a necessary one.

2. The people heard and believed (OT That the Spirit of God would cause the hearer to trust the God to build His Kingdom through his Word proclaimed)

We like to take God's job to ourselves. You might just meditate on the Psalm for today to get a sense of just how foolish that is. We imagine that we understand how things work and we will grow this kingdom. Jonah thought he knew the better way, and it did not involve inviting those wretched Ninevites to the kingdom party. But God had other ideas. His kingdom reached to people whom Jonah did not approve of. We could preach a whole sermon God's expansive love and we have in the past.

But this sermon is about what God did next. God sent a reluctant, peevish, and sometimes bigoted fellow to his enemies to preach a message of repentance. He did, unwillingly and perhaps a little less than energetically. Wonder of wonders, it worked. The people of Nineveh, all the way to the king, heard Jonah's words, believed them and repented. God relented of his decision to destroy them. Jonah will need to have his eyes opened to God's expansive love later in the book, but again, that is the other sermon.

This sermon is about that prophet standing in the middle of the town square and mumbling a message which he does not want to preach and he does not want the hearers to take to heart. He will leave after he does his duty to set up a camp outside of the city in

hopes of seeing God rain down fire and brimstone upon these wretched gentiles. And he will be disappointed.

He will be disappointed because God's Word, even when we get it wrong, when we have terrible thoughts and actions, it still does its job. Here the preacher might want to import Isaiah 55 which speaks of God's Word bearing its fruit inexorably.

We often want to gussy up God's word. We want to make it more effective by our programming, by our style, by our cheerful demeanor, or something else. We major in the minors and imagine that it is the things we do that bring the sinners to repentance and the folks to the baptismal font.

In my first parish, a tiny little parish on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, I tried all sorts of things to bring people in. We had friendship Sundays, we set up community events, and we did all sorts of things which experts had told us we needed to do. I do not regret any of it, and yet I have to say that I never netted a single person from one of those events.

I still clearly remember standing in the pulpit preaching one of my forgettable early sermons and seeing a woman in the congregation whom I did not know, but would come to know very well. She sat in the pew and openly wept through the whole service. After others had left, we sat, me in the pew in front of her, and she wringing her hands in her place, and we spoke.

She would go on to be one of the best members my parish had. She taught and directed Sunday School and was a regular attender of worship and Bible study. One of my greatest joys was to run into her daughter at a youth gathering many years later, the daughter who had given me a hug every Sunday after worship when she was six years old. I did not bring her to church that day. God did. His Word was what changed her. Not me, not my programming, nor anything that I did. God had loved from the day the Roman Catholic priest had baptized her as an infant and he had never forgotten her. He had been calling and calling and one day she heard and showed up at our doors. I had almost nothing to do that except to watch God at work.

God makes the same Word work in our midst. Trust it. He will do something with it. Don't get in the way, be as ready as you can, but don't imagine that this will happen by your power and your wisdom. Get ready to go on a wild ride. Jonah did.

3. The time is fulfilled, the kingdom is here. (Epistle and Gospel - That the hearer would believe that what happens right here in this assembly this morning is a life changing and empowering event, leading them closer to the heavenly reality and giving them hope for this day.)

Today Jesus does something funny with words. If you are not a wordy sort of person, you might have missed it but he changed the way the Bible talked about the kingdom of God. It is no longer a future tense, it is no longer a conditional phrase, it is a simply statement

of fact, the kingdom of God is here. The birth of that child in a manger so long ago has changed everything for everyone from the lowliest insect in some distant field to the rulers of the kingdoms of the earth. God himself, to which no one can be compared, has come into the flesh of this humanity. The ruler of heaven and earth, the governor of the universe has run the human race, all the way to the grave, all the way to the bitter end of a cross and a tomb. He has endured pain, probably far more than you and I will ever know. He knows hunger and want, he knows weariness and loneliness. He has been distracted in his prayers and had his Sabbath interrupted by the necessities of life. And he has redeemed the whole of life, asserting his authority over every moment, over every treasure, over every part of his creation.

The old order, shattered by sin, would deny his presence. There is a great battle going on right now for the hearts and minds of people in this regard. You have been called here today because God has opened your eyes and given you the faith which finds his authority, his kingdom at work. Today he exercises that authority in the forgiveness of your sins, in the bestowing of new life, in the baptism of tens and hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Today he authoritatively sends you, his people, out to love and serve, lead, help, care. The kingdom of God is here. He has hidden it in simple people as he once did in a carpenter's son from Nazareth. But in that carpenter's son he called and fishermen heard today. Through you the people of this place, he continues to make that kingdom come and his power now resides in your words, in your deeds, in your community. With eyes on that kingdom, what will be? What will he make us to be? What will he do? What will he do through us? His love for his whole creation guides us, his sacrifice and redemption inspire us, his presence unites us. The kingdom of God, incarnate in the flesh of Christ and His body today, has come. Let all of us, and the rest of the world, repent and believe!