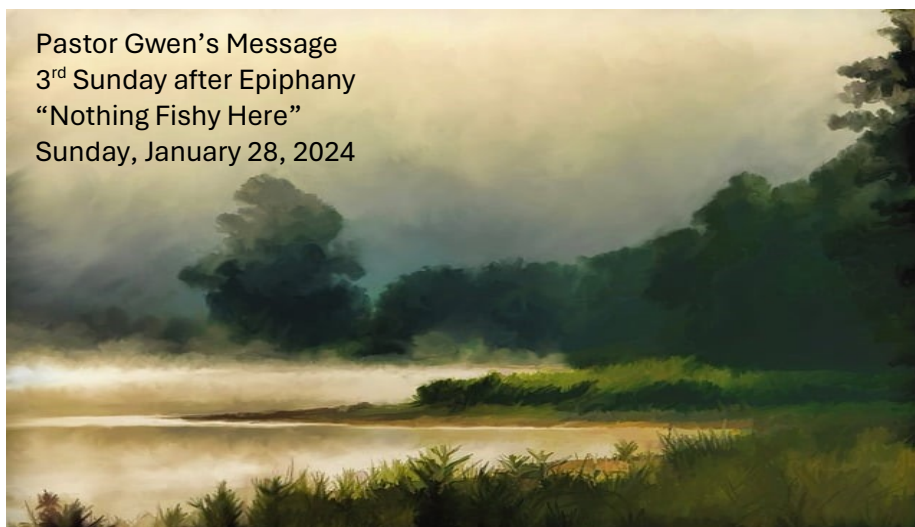


Pastor Gwen's Message
 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
 "Nothing Fishy Here"
 Sunday, January 28, 2024



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

Two of our texts this morning have their emphasis on fish or fishing. The reading from Jonah is about how God used a "big fish" that we have interpreted as a whale, to set Jonah straight. We all know the story from our Sunday school days, where God called Jonah to go and deliver the kind of message a prophet would, to the Ninevites. And Jonah did not want to do as God asked. He wound up in the belly of a whale "big fish" for three days. After that experience, Jonah finally goes to Nineveh. He cries out to the Ninevites that "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The city residents believe Jonah and repent and the city is saved.

Our Gospel story is the retelling of Jesus calling four of His disciples as He passed by the Sea of Galilee. Simon and his brother Andrew, along with James and his brother John, who were all fishermen were called by Jesus. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Two sets of brothers called away from their nets and their father respectively, drop what they are doing and follow Jesus.

Wow what great stories we have today. I know full well that you all have your own fishing stories to tell as I do. Fishing as a little girl, well a younger girl, my dad and I would go out to a small lake and rent a rowboat and fish. We threw back in the ones we caught that were too little to keep and kept the ones mom would just love to clean when we got home. Not! Rodney's famous fish story is about going out with Dick Roberts and getting lost on Butternut Lake. Where Dick's wife and I drove around the lake to try to find them, only to have them wash up on shore in the dark, when they remembered they could use the trolling motor after the boat motor quit to get to shore. And you too have your stories I would guess about the one that got away, or how many fish you caught on that Saturday morning, all of which might sound fishy to us.

And so today, I decided to give up the fish stories and go in another direction. So here goes.

Is there anything in this world that would make you drop everything and pursue an entirely new life? Maybe a great job offer? Or retirement? Or an invitation to go live with

your kids since it is getting harder to manage your big home on the lake alone? Or maybe a marriage proposal? Or maybe you have been given a chance to make a huge difference in another part of the world? Think for a minute what would take you away from everything you know for something entirely different? Thought-provoking questions, isn't it? And my guess would be that we would all want to answer, "Nothing!"

As I mentioned in Mark's Gospel today, we hear Jesus calling four disciples. They dropped everything and followed Him. Thinking back to Jesus' days, young Jewish boys were required to memorize the Torah. These are the first five books of Moses in the Bible. This took endless hours and much discipline. This practice prepared the boys to be men. Then at age 13 they became men and were then responsible for obeying the law. This day was marked as their Bar Mitzvah, which means "son of commandment". And so, they were then accountable for their actions. The rabbi that was their teacher selected his two best students to come and follow him. This was an honor to be chosen to study to be a rabbi.

So, it was probably not so much out of the ordinary that when Simon, Andrew, James, and John were called by Jesus to follow him they did just that. For Jesus was the new rabbi to them. Remember, rabbi means teacher. They simply were honored to be chosen. They picked up and gladly followed Jesus. It seems that Simon, Andrew, James, and John did not give thought to the next big school of fish they would have to haul in. They did not think that maybe their wives would not let them go. They did not think about what their friends would say about their leaving. They did not go home and pack a bag or think what it meant to leave their father or families alone. They just knew that they were to follow this guy, Jesus. Follow him and travel around the countryside preaching that the time was near for the kingdom of God is at hand. For them it was clear that they were to repent and believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and proclaim that to others.

I know for some of us today, this would be very, very difficult. We talked about a lot about inviting others to "come and see" who Jesus is last Sunday. Not always an easy task, is it? First of all, we do not like change. As individuals, we mostly do not handle change very well. And as a congregation, sometimes it can be uncomfortable to have change thrust upon you. Do you remember how you felt when you came to church, and the chairs were changed around? No more center isle? A small change but it took some getting used to. Patti and Terry Tarras thought it was good to change things up, so they moved chairs and made two isles in this sanctuary. Boy were people confused as to where to sit, not to mention how communion would be handled. We tend to like things the way they have always been.

Have you heard the joke about how many Methodists it takes to change a light bulb? Three, one to hold the bulb and two to turn the ladder. Does anyone know how many Lutherans it takes to change a light bulb? None. Lutherans don't like change. Woe be it for me to use the new Lord's Prayer during worship. How would you feel about that change?

Well, I am here to tell you that change is part of the Christian life. Jesus never calls anyone to the status quo. Jesus accepts us for who we are but knows that we can be more than we are. And that is not a bad thing.

Our Jonah reading this morning about Nineveh is a great example. The people changed from their sinful ways and were saved. There are many instances in the Bible where God changed hearts and great things happened. Take for instance, Paul. He was a persecutor of the early Christians and God changed his heart and he became a great missionary.

And for us today change does not need to be so dramatic. Change can happen even over a long period of time. As the Holy Spirit moves within us the priorities of our lives can turn around. Sometime even upside-down. These internal changes have their outward expressions. Maybe we lessen our time in the morning watching Good Morning America and spend more time in prayer and Bible study to start our day. Maybe the change is financial. You will hear later on during our annual meeting that our pledges outweighed our present needs significantly. Maybe your change comes in healing long broken relationships or letting go of grudges. Whatever it is, change is the key word. We are called to change. Called to live and grow into the kingdom of God.

Another call I hear clearly in our Gospel lesson is the call to follow. Jesus' invitation to Peter, Andrew, James, and John was to "follow him". And to follow mean that we will subordinate ourselves to the leader. We go in the direction that the leader is headed. We accept instruction and the discipline of the leader.

A quick short story. And remember all the stories I tell are true and some of them even happened. A father was filling out an application form for his daughter, who was seeking entrance to a very exclusive college. The daughter did not think she had any chance of being accepted by such a prestigious school. Well, the father continued to fill out the application and he came to a question on the form which asked whether his daughter, the applicant was a leader. In honesty the father wrote, "No, but she is a good follower." The application was sent in and a month later a letter arrived notifying him that his daughter had been accepted. At the bottom of the page the dean had written, "Since the entering class of 500 has 499 leaders, we thought that there ought to be room for one follower."

Quite a bit unlike the entering class of that college, our church has one leader. Jesus Christ is our leader and we have come together this morning to hear Him encourage and strengthen us in the task that He calls us too. Jesus calls us to follow in his footsteps and be his hands and feet on earth, right here in Park Falls. We are to follow his examples for living and his teachings. Together as church on earth we are to yes, "fish for people". We are a fellowship of people who are following Jesus on His mission of bringing the Gospel to all people. And when someone "comes and sees" and stays in our church family, that is change folks. We change as a community because we grow.

Our scripture text tells us that the Kingdom of God has come near. The Kingdom of God is the Spirit of God working in the hearts of people to restore them to Christ. Jesus came to love us, to forgive us and to carry us in himself beyond our sin and into new life. Jesus died on the cross for us so that our sin is no longer ours to bear. On the third day God raised him from the dead in victory over sin. The good news is that Jesus shares His victory with us. God came in Jesus to save us, to redeem us, to rescue us, to forgive us and to give us a sure hope for the present and for the future.

And so, we follow, we follow Christ who gives us His promised salvation and life abundant. The reason we exist as a congregation is to follow Jesus and bring people under the influence of the love of God and into fellowship with Christ. Christ the Servant is not a religious club run for the benefit of the members. In fact, as you have probably heard before, the church is one organization that exists for those who are not yet members. And I realize that we all love each other's company, but we remember that we exist for the sake of those who are not yet its members. Our purpose, our mission is a never-ending task. We need to live out this purpose for the church on earth to grow and change where **all** are members who know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

So, let's follow our leader, Jesus Christ and be the best fishers of people we can be. This will happen as we draw on the strength of our Lord through the Gospel, in our baptismal promise and in the Lord's Supper. I pray that Jesus will keep coming into our lives with His power that transforms us and changes us into people who love and serve Him. Jesus will always be the "good news". And folks there is nothing fishy about that! **AMEN**