

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7:29-35

Mark 1:14-20

I've never seen an ugly fish mounted on someone's wall. Usually the prize trophy is of a splendid variety – a rainbow trout in full color, a marlin in all of its magnificence, or maybe a large mouth bass highlighting... well, its large mouth. Some fish are meant for a beautifully carved plaque, a spotlight from the ceiling and a place of honor on the wall. Outdoor elegance is captured in a world-class-catch that becomes a trophy. Some fish should not be mounted on a wall.

I looked up ugly fish on the internet because I figured that there were some. I wasn't disappointed. The names alone capture their features. Two particularly hideous creatures are the Blob Fish and the Lump Fish. Whoever named those two fellows didn't think about it too long. Making the top ten ugliest fish was the Sea Wolf. The Sea Wolf looks like a cross between Jar Jar Binks and Jimmy Durante. The Stone Fish looks like the Grinch with gills. Perhaps the vilest looking creature is the Angler Fish which, to me, is simply a swimming zombie head. Of particular note is the Fanfin Seadevil, which one gets when one crosses Freddy Kruger with Needle Face. And I don't know what the Goblin Shark did to make God angry with him, but he is clearly suffering from a divine curse.

Ugly fish – people don't put them on their walls. The world is swimming with ugly fish. And the Lord wants fishermen. Jesus is in Galilee and He sets His eyes on those who will bear His name. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John – they were fishermen by trade. Boats and nets, the watery world and big catches; now Jesus is going to give those fishermen a new vocation. Follow Me. Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.

When the sons of Zebedee threw out their nets for a catch the net was indiscriminate, that is to say that the net didn't care what was caught in it. Poor Forest Gump; when he first started shrimping, his net pulled in an army boot, a toilet seat, and a license plate. I will make you fishers of men. All kinds, not just the beautiful; all kinds from all walks in all sorts of seedy places; I will make you fishers of men. And the net goes out. What is the net? The net is the Gospel which catches men alive. The Gospel calls all people – in exactly the same way. The Word of God calls sinners to repentance, and breathes into the spiritually dead the breath of life. Into the church, the boat, the ark, the vessel of salvation – the net of the Gospel has brought you into this church. I will make you fishers of men.

Jonah, the OT prophet, Jonah wasn't too keen on going to Nineveh. The fish were ugly in Nineveh. No trophies there. There's nothing but Snakehead Fish and Goblin Sharks and Sea Wolves in Nineveh. No thank you; not fishing in Nineveh. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah and he fled from God, fled from his calling, fled from the work God had given him to do. Nineveh was full of scoundrels and ne'er-do-wells. Nineveh was riddled with lawless scum and twisted villains. Nineveh was no trophy. It was home to drunks and thieves and harlots and corruption on every level. And God wants to fish *there*. Jonah would learn... it's not wise to disobey God's call.

Fleeing in the opposite direction of Nineveh, Jonah is discovered to be a prophetic runaway. Pitched off the ship, Jonah discovers the inside of a great fish. Jonah was three days and three nights in the heart of darkness, in the belly of a fish. The prodigal prophet repents of his rebellion; he remembers the Lord; he remembers that salvation belongs to the Lord. And the great fish vomits Jonah up on dry land.

The Lord likes to fish. His case, His wall is full of trophies. Most are ugly. And yet He fishes. You and me, in our sins we are akin to the Goblin Shark. Oh, not your face. Each of you has a pleasing face, a warm and gentle countenance. Some of you are downright radiant. But your soul; the inner man, the inner woman; what resides in the heart of sinful man? Pride and lust and greed and hate and a relentless self-righteousness (Mark 7:21-23). What resides in the heart of sinful woman? Pride and lust and greed and hate and a relentless self-righteousness (Romans 7:18). Sin and its appearance are horrific. Our soul is decorated with indulgence and deceit, with petty vindictiveness and an intense laziness to do good. And yet God wills to fish.

Repent and believe the Good News. The Kingdom of God is near; the Lord Himself has visited His people. Repent, turn your face toward Immanuel, God with us, for He comes to cast the net of His death and resurrection to draw sinners unto Himself. Nineveh did not *deserve* to have the Word of the Lord come to them, and yet it came... through Jonah. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord" (Jonah 3:1-3).

The Lord God will always find servants to fish. And God's Word does not return empty. The net of the Gospel catches fish. God's Word accomplishes the purpose for which it is designed. Despite our ugliness, God sends His Son. In this is love. The Great Fisher of men came to enact the Father's love, came to enact divine justice, enact His saving grace. He was the Beautiful One, sinless, full of humility, chastity, and truth. He was made like us. In outward appearance Jesus looked like us who are Blob Fish, Lump Fish. His outward appearance was common, ordinary. But Jesus of Nazareth was different. Jesus of Nazareth was and is true God and true man in one person. The Author of Creation abides in our flesh and He is holy. His soul is decorated with charity, with devotion to His Father, with an unqualified sacrificial love for His neighbor. Only He; and He came to be numbered with sinners. The Beautiful One was soiled with your sin, my self-righteousness, your lack of self-control, our unforgiving heart. Divine justice requires that sin be punished. All our sin was put on Him and God condemned it, punished it and Jesus suffered it all. On the cross, Jesus was caught in a net of a different sort. Satan thought that he had a trophy for his wall, but – oh, no! Satan snapped at a man and discovered God in His saving and righteous power.

The time was fulfilled. On the holy cross the Lord Christ crushed sin and death. On the holy cross the Beautiful One was hideous beyond compare as He became the Greatest Sinner (not His own, yours and mine). Every wretched thing there ever was or will be was heaped on Him, an avalanche of all that which is contrary to His nature. But in bearing our sin, He triumphs. The Lord Christ opens heaven as He is crucified. He defeats the enemy as He is crucified. It is finished. The crucified King is our trophy – for our walls, for our necks, for our altar. His blood

marks the door of our soul. Satan, death, and our own ugly violations of God's law cannot harm us. Our soul is decorated with the Lord Christ's beauty. That is what it means to be baptized. That is what it means to be washed in His blood and made holy. In your soul there is truth. You are baptized. In your soul there is the fruit of Christ's cross, Christ's life. You are baptized. In your soul there is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You are baptized. We are nestled safely in the ark of Christ's church. He has brought us here by His net to share His life with us. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.