

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

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Lesson: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

When I was a child, my grandparents always took me fishing with my older brother. In all likelihood, for the longest time I probably didn't like it very much. I remember thinking that worms were just slimy little creatures that enjoyed wiggling between my fingers as I tried to hook them. I also was not able to cast my line very well. I know that because I fully recall the horror I felt that one time my hook didn't land in the body of water that was in front of me, but instead that hook went backward and became embedded in my grandmother's scalp. [I remember that some side-cutters were involved in the extraction and that she ultimately was fine.] I recall that I was always disappointed that my grandparents and my older brother were the ones who always caught a fish, but I never did. One day, though, I finally caught one. My grandparents took a photo of me with this fish, and I still have it. {show picture} The day was a few months shy of my fourth birthday. In the photo, I'm wearing a

Masters of the Universe hat, and a straight-from-the-80s vest jacket. However, there is one more thing that I'm definitely wearing in this picture: the biggest grin that a little boy can muster. I was hooked, you might say. Although I had been reluctant about fishing prior to that day, you can tell by this picture that things had changed.

Reluctance is nothing new to any of us. As long as there have been people, those people have been reluctant to do various things. Some of you may have been reluctant this morning to venture out of your warm home to come here. I get it. An example of another reluctant person is Jonah. His story plays out over four chapters, and those few pages have earned him the moniker of "the reluctant prophet." Jonah doesn't want to follow God's instructions to go to Nineveh to warn them about their sins, so he flees in the opposite direction. As he is trying to get out of what he's supposed to do, the story goes that he is swallowed by a great fish and three days later he is dropped off at Nineveh, which was the capital of the enemy Assyrian Empire. Jonah is so reluctant to be the prophetic voice for these people that he actually shortchanges the message. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" His total prophetic message is eight words. Eight words! Imagine if I got up here and preached an eight-word sermon. Granted, some of you would welcome that. However, many of you would think that I was shirking my duties. Which is exactly what Jonah was doing. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's all he said. And notice that he doesn't even reference God in his eight-word proclamation. Jonah was doing the absolute least that he could do. From the beginning of the story to the very end, Jonah was reluctant, and he was never pleased with being a prophet. If he gave this kind of effort in a sport, he would be cut from the team. And what resulted from Jonah's uninspired proclamation? The whole city repented, and God had mercy on them. Is this story a testament to Jonah's great

work? Of course not. Ultimately, the story meant to ask the reader – you and I – whether we can accept God showing mercy to people who you and I may despise. Perhaps people who’ve hurt us. Perhaps people that we disapprove of. If God shows them mercy, what will we do about it? Will we throw a tantrum like Jonah and cry out that it would be better for us to die? Or will we come to the conclusion that you and I need grace like everyone else, and that God’s abundance of grace should reshape our views of others?

The story of Jonah is also a testament that God is greater than Jonah’s reluctance. If Jonah is fleeing that way, then God will make him go this way. If Jonah begrudgingly proclaims eight measly words to Nineveh, well then God is going to use those eight words to do an amazing thing in the hearts of the Ninevites. God can work with reluctant people. In fact, he does some of his best work with reluctant people. *Moses = reluctant // Esther = reluctant // Isaiah = reluctant //* The list certainly does go on. It goes on because God has a tendency to still do the divine work of drawing people in even when people are reluctant to go along with it. To see this, we need look no further than our gospel lesson. Jesus sees Simon and Andrew casting their net out into the sea. I’m not sure why they immediately followed him, but if they had any hesitancy, Jesus somehow broke through it. Jesus hollers at them and says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” That’s the imagery that Jesus first uses to describe the work of his Father’s kingdom: fish in a net.

Have you ever seen fish that are caught in a fishing net? I haven’t spoken with any of them, but it appears to me that many of the fish are reluctant to be in that net. It appears to me that the more they are drawn in, the more they tend to fervently struggle against it. The gospel of John uses this same image of God using a net to go

fishing. In John, Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” It is the language of pulling someone closer in with a rope or a net. God is fishing for people, and some people are going to be very reluctant to be caught in God’s fishing net. Maybe they are reluctant because they are struggling with the idea of God actually caring about them. Or maybe it is because the last thing they want is to share this net with someone who hurt them in the past. Or maybe they are reluctant because God’s net seems to be so big, and they don’t like the idea that the catch may include those they deem unfavorable. We can come up with any number of reasons why people are reluctant to be drawn toward God in his net. But that isn’t the point. The point is that the pull of God’s net is greater than our reluctance. It is good news that God can handle our human weaknesses and struggles. It is good news that God can handle our fears and our doubts. It is good news that God can handle it whenever we struggle against this net of grace. Even when we are like Jonah, reluctant to accept the call that God has given us, it is good news that God can still do some amazing work through us.

Why would God be so ready to draw in a net full of people with begrudging attitudes and who struggle to get away? Why would God want to work through people who can be stubbornly reluctant to live in God’s net of grace? “Why” is a hard question to answer. But I have a clue. {Pick up picture} I look at this picture and I see the joy that is all over my three-year-old face. It is for one, solitary, tiny fish that I caught. I see the joy on that face, and I think of the rejoicing that must take place in heaven when the bounty of the catch is revealed as God pulls in that net of grace that surrounds each and every one of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.