

SERMON TITLE: "God's Message through the Animals: The Fish"
SERMON TEXT: John 21:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 10, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday I told you that I had recently read a novel about a stray cat that inspired Christian faith in a pastor and his congregation. In many ways, Petey was just a normal cat who needed some veterinary care, enjoyed his food, and liked to sleep many hours every day. But Petey the cat also had some unique traits. He believed he was sent there by God to help that pastor and his people. Petey liked to ride around in the pastor's pickup. And he insisted on taking his place at the front of the church by the pulpit every Sunday. And, so, in that fictional story in which a cat could narrate everything he was thinking, *of course* Petey succeeded in helping the pastor and his people grow in their faith!

That book got me to thinking about animal stories and imagery in the Bible. So, during this month of July, we're considering some of those animals, to see what they might have to say to us. For example, last Sunday on the Fourth of July weekend, we heard the message from the eagle—that we can renew our youth like the eagles' by praising God, by receiving God's mercy, and by gaining a heavenly view. In upcoming Sundays, we'll tune into God's message through some sheep and a donkey. Today, though, we're focusing on the story in the Gospel of John, chapter 21. Let's listen for God's message to us through the fish.

1—TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

If the fish in John 21 could talk, I'm pretty sure the first thing they'd say is, "Take care of your health." This story happens soon after Easter. Jesus and the disciples had just recently been through the trauma of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion and their own guilt-laden betrayal and denial. Fortunately, Jesus had risen from the dead, and he'd been seen by Mary Magdalene in the cemetery garden on Easter morning. But even that good news undoubtedly raised some questions, confusion, and fear. On

Easter evening, Jesus appeared to the male disciples in a room where they were hiding behind locked doors. Then, a week later, Jesus appeared to the male disciples a second time, when he famously helped “Doubting Thomas” to believe. Those two post-resurrection appearances to the male disciples surely helped, but the men were obviously stretched beyond their comfort zones. Quite likely they were exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Having been cooped up with all that grief and stress in Jerusalem, the disciples desperately needed a change of pace. That’s why, in verse three, we hear Peter declaring, “I’m going fishing.” He probably had no idea what he and his fellow disciples would be doing in two months or two years, but he knew what his body, mind, and spirit needed that day. He needed to get away from danger. He needed to breathe in some fresh air. He needed to let his eyes feast on the beauty of God’s creation. After all the trauma and drama in Jerusalem, Peter needed to return home to the lake and his fishing boat, at least for a little while, to something familiar and comforting. He needed some time to heal and rest and to make space for God’s future to unfold. The eager response of the other disciples indicates that they too were in need of this opportunity for healing.

In this story, and quite likely in many of ours, fish are calling us to take care of our health. If life is too stressful, go fishing. If life is too scary, go fishing. If life is too busy, go fishing. If you don’t know or can’t decide where you should go next, go fishing. For some of us, that literally means fishing with a boat and net, rod and reel, hooks and bait. For some of us, it could mean taking a vacation to a distant place. Or for others of us, it might mean immersing ourselves in a good book or a movie. Maybe it could even mean attending worship with a church.

If we think of fishing as a metaphor, it could mean doing anything that helps restore and maintain our well-being. None of us can endure continual stress and anxiety. None of us can work or worry non-stop. If we try, it will kill us. How much better to listen to God’s message through the fish—the message that we regularly need to pause from our problems and take care of our health.

2—WHEN THERE AREN'T ANY FISH—WHAT CHANGES MIGHT BE NEEDED?

But there's more to the fish message in John 21 than just getting a healing reprieve. The next part of the story raises some difficult questions. What happens when we go fishing but catch nothing? When there aren't any fish to talk to us, what's the message then? Is our fishing a waste of time? Is fishing just another source of frustration, embarrassment, and shame? What if we were depending on catching some fish for our dinner? When few to zero fish is our reality, does the failure of our fishing expedition add to our stress instead of relieve it?

I suppose these many problems inherent in catching no fish are the reasons why people sometimes come home with tall tales about the fish that got away or the fish that was th-i-i-i-s long! While some people can enjoy dangling a hook in the water for hours on end without any bites, others of us are more goal-oriented, and we like to see tangible results.

That's probably especially true if we carry the fishing metaphor over into Jesus' call of the disciples to be fishers of people. I think all of us Christians feel bad that our attempts to invite and welcome others into the church and Christian faith aren't more successful. We wish our efforts to nurture children, youth, and young adults could be more fruitful.

This same sense of failure can frustrate us in other aspects of our lives also. We can ask, if Jesus calls us to do something, then why don't we succeed? Is it because we don't believe enough? Is it that we aren't obedient enough? Are we lacking in the right techniques? If we move the net to the other side of the boat, will that help? How about if we move to a different pond or lake? But if we've tried all those changes and still don't get the success we long for, then what? Do we abandon fishing altogether?

If the fish in this John 21 story could talk to us, they might offer several suggestions here. One might be that we need to lobby the authorities to stock the lake. "Lord God, if you've called us to this fishing ministry, then please supply us with some fish!" Or the fish might tell us, if they're not biting,

maybe we should change the bait. Or, if our no-results fishing is stressing us out more than healing us, then maybe we ought to explore some other way to find healing for ourselves and for the fish.

The other day I was talking with someone from our congregation. He told me that his poor health was preventing him from going fishing, and that was disappointing. But he and his friends were still getting together to go out for coffee and visit. That social time was providing important support and giving him a sense of normalcy and hope in spite of his illness. Even though going fishing was impossible right now, coffee time with his friends was an alternate way to meet his needs and theirs.

As we age and times change, “fishing” is going to change too. That’s why I invited Rev. Rebekah Simon-Peter to come and speak with us on Wednesday, July 27, at 7:00 p.m. Rebekah will share some ideas with us from her book *Forging a New Path: Moving the Church Forward in a Post-Pandemic World*. I hope you will plan to attend that event and help us imagine what our next steps might be for our church. Where and how is Jesus calling us to throw out the fishing net? When there aren’t any fish, is there some new way of developing relationships and meeting spiritual needs?

3—EVERYTHING IS BETTER WITH JESUS

Back to the fish in John 21. Maybe their final message to us would be the assurance that everything is better with Jesus. Even when we’re exhausted and in need of healing, and even when our attempts at fishing come up short, Jesus still provides the best answers. Jesus still makes everything more successful. Jesus still provides the most hope.

Even though Peter and some of his companions had been fishermen by trade, and they had fished all night, they had caught nothing. But God’s son, who was raised as a carpenter, was able to tell them exactly where to put their net, and *voilà!* Immediately, 153 fish appeared in their net! That was enough fish to fill the net beyond capacity, but Jesus’ positive influence kept it from breaking. We like this part of the story because the fish are proclaiming the happy message that, even when we’ve been overwhelmed by trauma and feel like a failure, wonderful miracles are possible with Jesus!

Bible scholars have always wondered why John tells us the detail that there were 153 fish. Did someone really count them? Or was 153 a symbolic number that meant something to the first readers of this gospel? No one has ever really figured that out. It's a mystery! But / can't help drawing the connection to our fundraiser for the parking lot resurfacing project. When we divided out the estimated cost of \$15,000 by the number of parking spaces, it came out to \$153.00/space. So many of you have made your \$153 donations that, to date, we have raised \$8100! You've been very generous! Thank you! And thanks to Jesus for making this project possible for us. The Trustees started out with some thousands of dollars, and I know the United Women in Faith are planning to donate more to the cause after the Craft Fair this October. So, the net should get filled up nicely.

You know, there are a lot of ways that we could spend our money and our time besides at the church. But most of us would agree that we gain a lot of good from our participation in this ministry. We find hope and encouragement here as we pray for one another. We develop and grow our muscles of compassion and love. We praise God and learn from the wisdom of Jesus. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We connect with scripture and the tradition of the Christian faith. We are given meaningful ways to serve. We are inspired and challenged to go out and transform the world in positive ways. We welcome and invite others to join us in this faith journey. Yes, there are *other* activities, communities, and ways of life to which we could devote our time, talents, and treasure. But, as the fish would tell us, everything is better with Jesus.

CONCLUSION

I have a clergy colleague who just retired after 40 years of ministry. Since he retired on June 30, Kent already posted a picture on his Facebook page showing him with a 20" brown trout he caught. The fish was impressive, but so was Kent's expression of joy. As we've heard in John 21, God's message to us through the fish is to take care of our health, make some changes if needed, and remember, everything's better with Jesus.