

Epiphany 3—January 21, 2024  
Text: Jonah 3:1-5,10  
Theme: Jesus Gave Us Hip-Waders

**In our prayer of the day, we ask God “mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us.” What infirmities and from which of them is He defending us? We could list all manner of infirmities from bad knees to the war between Israel and Hamas. It only takes a brief perusal of the Chicago Tribune to see many other things from which we need defending. But the truth is this. The most severe infirmity and the worst danger is unbelief. Everything else will work itself out in God’s time but unbelief at death is eternally fatal.**

**In the Old Testament text, we see Jonah sent to Nineveh to proclaim the word of the Lord. I am sure the Ninevites in those days had many problems like people have had throughout the history of living on this broken world but what God was concerned with was their unbelief. If they are not believers, they cannot be rescued from the worst of their dire situations. No matter how healthy, wealthy, and wise one might be, nothing can make up for an eternity in Hell. So, God sent Jonah.**

**Now we know that Jonah was not a very willing participant. He tried to go to Tarshish to get away and that ended in a swim in the depths of the sea. Then, to rescue him from drowning, God sent a big**

**fish to swallow him, and he spent three days in fish guts. Finally, he decided that God's way might be better. As he got to Nineveh and apparently saw the flagrant sin that was going on, he got excited to condemn these awful people. But then, they went and repented, and God forgave them. That angered Jonah. He had come all this way to watch God smite the evil doers, and then God goes and forgives them.**

**In the Gospel for today, Jesus is continuing to gather His disciples. He says that He will make us "fishers of men." Jesus is more pointed in His command of exactly what we are supposed to do in this world. Some Christians seem to believe that they are called to smite the evil with the Word of God! They are like Jonah. Let's have some fire and brimstone! Some Christians are willing to compromise God's Word to appease the people of the world whom it offends. But Jesus makes it clear that His disciples are to be in the world but not of the world. We are to be fully involved but out of love for others, we do not conform to the evil all around us and we speak the truth of God's Word. It's a little like fishing from a river bank as opposed to fishing in open water.**

**To fish from a river bank is tricky, especially when the river is flowing rapidly. When we were in Kentucky for vacation last summer, our cabin was right on the Cumberland River which is a**

**very cold, very fast flowing river in central Kentucky. There are deadfalls all along the banks and we “fisherman” lost about \$100 worth of Neal’s tackle trying to fish from the bank. What we needed was some hip-waders so that we could wade out into the open river and fish in the current without our lures getting sucked under logs. Even in these difficult circumstances, Neal, the fish whisperer, managed to catch 5 rainbow trout and give everyone a turn reeling one in.**

**Jesus expects us to be fishers of men who get out into the current and fish. Like God sent Jonah into the melee of Nineveh, so Jesus sends us into the melee of our world to fish for men. Get away from the bank and all the deadfalls of this world and fish for people. Jesus does not leave us stranded on the bank. He gives us hip-waders that heal all infirmities and defend us from all danger. That is what we asked of Him in the prayer of the day today.**

**“Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us.” How does that happen? You and I are washed in the waters of Baptism, instructed by His Holy Word, and fed with His holy body and blood. The very body and blood that paid for our sins heals the infirmities and strengthens us to do the work He has given us to do all the while defending us from the evil one.**

**That does not mean that the footing won't be treacherous and the water cold. It means that the Holy Spirit is with us every step of the way. As Jonah learned, do what God tells you to do and He will take care of all the side issues. Don't do what God tells you to do and you might well find yourself in fish guts. And Jonah also learned, as would Jesus' disciples, as do we, that God does not always accomplish His will in the way we think He should. He often even has a plan with which we do not agree. No matter, our calling is to fish. God will bring the fish according to His will and He will empower us and protect us to do His will.**

**God is also dramatic. He uses dramatic effect over and over again to help us see His glory. He could have sent a boat for Jonah instead of a big fish to swallow him. We didn't finish 2023 with a \$22,000 surplus by happenstance. God wanted us to see that He provides everything we need. The Israelites stood on the edge of the Red Sea certain that they were going to be killed or dragged back to Egypt as slaves. Yet God used Moses to part the sea and they crossed on dry land while it closed over the Egyptians who tried to follow them. Mary and Martha stood at Lazarus' tomb weeping over the death of their brother when Jesus arrived, reminded them of His promise that all who believe in Him will never die, and then, He promptly raised Lazarus from the dead for dramatic emphasis. Our**

**God loves to make a dramatic statement of His power to help us see and believe.**

**We pray in the prayer of the day, "mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us." He has done exactly that for us, and we will continue to be protected as long as we are fulfilling His will and fishing for men. It is up to Him and them as to the number of fish we catch. His will is that all people be saved but He also gives us the right to refuse Him. You and I are not in charge of any of that. All we are called to do is put on our hip-waders, wade out to the center of the current and fish.**

**The people of this congregation have been fishing for 110 years and what amazing success we have had. Take a walk down the halls and see photographs of literally hundreds of youths who have gone through our confirmation program. Hang a left on the way back and look at the pictures in the preschool of over 40 years of little children who were introduced to Jesus in our preschool. Every generation has different challenges and different victories but the mission is the same. Put on your hip waders, wade into the fray and get to fishing.**