

*Fishing for People*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*January 31, 2020 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*  
*Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20*

**Call to Worship:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont on this Fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

The word epiphany comes from the ancient Greek verb “to reveal.” Epiphany celebrates seeing the presence of God—the spirit that created the universe—revealed in Jesus, in other people, in nature and in ourselves. What we see revealed is more than random, static occurrences, it’s a story that progresses from a beginning long before us toward an end far beyond us.

Epiphany reminds us that the first part of our task is to see, and then to understand, and then to interpret the story and communicate its meaning to others as the Magi and John the Baptist did.

Today we need a new story of God’s presence and action in the world because the old interpretations have fostered racial, economic and environmental injustice and are leading toward humanity’s self-destruction. The good news is that a new story is rising out of the old, drawing on ancient wisdom, advanced science and the Spirit moving in our hearts and lives. More people see our oneness with all creation, and seeing it, they are changing their way of living.

The story of oneness ends our disastrous separation from nature and gives our lives meaning and purpose nurturing the conditions for all to thrive. The story of oneness enables us finally to fulfill the love commandments and Golden Rule—we see as Jesus did that strangers and enemies are our neighbors, extensions of our one shared self in God, and justice and peace flow from that awareness. The new story looks back on the stories of the past and sees eternal truths to help us find our way.

The new story is both hopeful and urgent, and its ability to save us depends entirely on us. God is calling us to be part of its movement now. Let us open our hearts and minds to this possibility as we worship together...

[The sermon begins on the next page.]

## *Fishing for People*

Myths are not stories that are untrue, they are stories that are always and eternally true. The Book of Jonah in the Bible may not have a factual basis, but it is full of truth.

God calls Jonah to prophesy to the powerful city of Nineveh that it has gone astray and needs to change or it will self-destruct. Jonah tries to run away, but God needs him and brings him back in the belly of a whale.

Today's passage begins with Jonah finally choosing to accept his path. He tells Nineveh the story that God has revealed to him. He is a stranger from a foreign religion crying out in the streets, with no political power or proof, yet his message is compelling enough for the entire society to change and be saved.

The Book of Jonah has been treasured for twenty-five hundred years because it is true. It is hard to choose the risks the Spirit asks us to take. It takes courage to tell a new story and speak truth to a power that could hurt us for it. We may run in the other direction, but the universe conspires to turn us back to our calling. And we find in the end that our faithful response wields more power than we could imagine to transform the world around us.

Jesus had a new story to tell. He called it "the good news." We hear his story often, so it sounds old, but it is new because it leads us into evolving stages of consciousness toward ever greater oneness and love. At each stage we see the story with new eyes, we understand it more deeply, we interpret it more widely.

Now the time of fulfillment has come when humanity must live fully into the new story, when we must see the epiphany, the truth revealed that earth is God's realm, that the Spirit of the universe is present in every person, creature, place and moment, and we must use our gifts to love and tend all within our reach.

We have reason to hope that this fulfillment is near. The new story has been budding and blossoming. Leaders of all religions are articulating it as never before. A Global Ethic and Earth Charter lay out how humanity needs to live in order to bring the new story to fruition.

Jesus gave three steps to achieve it. First, simply to believe. As Bill Coffin said, the miracle of faith is that first you leap and then you grow wings. Believing in the new story empowers us to fulfill it.

Second, repent, which means to open ourselves to metanoia, a transformation of our consciousness that expands our vision and understanding until we attain the heart and mind of Christ. Metanoia turns us away from the old story and opens us to the new.

The third step is to “fish for people.” We need to be part of a movement that casts the nets of the new story into the waters of humanity to unite people within it.

The Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies sponsored a conference in 2007 that asked how to create this new consciousness in society. Gus Speth edited the book that came out of the conference, entitled “The Coming Transformation.”

In his essay Gus described six ingredients needed to achieve a change of consciousness. I have talked about them before, but they echo today’s scriptures, and they are increasing in our time, so they are worth looking at again.

The first condition is the awareness of a calamity or threat of one. This was part of Jonah’s message to Nineveh, it was central to the prophetic ministry of Jesus, and today polls show that a growing majority of Americans are aware of threats to humanity and the earth.

A second condition is the need for wise leaders. God had a hard time teaching Jonah to be wise, but the non-Jewish leaders of Nineveh immediately acted wisely in response to God’s call. The wisdom of Jesus has inspired many of the wisest leaders of our time. Many leaders today believe in the new story of oneness and nonviolence and are working with it to solve our greatest problems.

The next three conditions Gus prescribes are the core of what it means to fish for people. We need to articulate a new narrative and positive vision, we need a broad movement that is united by that vision, and the movement needs effective, compelling communication and social marketing, like Jonah crying out in the streets and Jesus calling the disciples and the Rev. William Barber, Amanda Gorman and Greta Thunberg moving people today.

Finally, the new story needs to be more than words if it is going to change the consciousness of the culture. It has to be translated into models at every level, in our homes, towns and nations, in our churches, schools and businesses. That is how the followers of Jesus converted the Roman Empire, by being the change they wanted to see.

Paul Hawken in his book *Blessed Unrest* says that today the largest social movement in history is promoting the new story and providing models of everything from farming to banking to resolving conflicts to responding to crimes to healing ecosystems and on and on.

The conditions are in place for the transformation that could save human civilization and all life on earth. The task is daunting and opposition fierce, we may feel like hiding or running away, but we need to hold onto the vision of Jonah rising above his fears, striding boldly through the corrupt city crying out. We need to hold onto the vision of Peter, Andrew, James and John leaving their nets and rising out of their boats to fish for people instead.

At that moment, the movement Jesus was forming stood at a total of five. We have far more going for us. We have every reason to believe, and to hope, and to open our lives to let the same Holy Spirit that moved them lead us.

What is coming, God alone can see, but if our prayer is, lead me, Lord, make thy way plain before my face, move me to do thy will, then we can be sure that we will be part of the new story our hearts long for and our world needs.

Let us pray in silence...