

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 21: 1-19

John 21 is one of my favorite gospel stories. I looked back in my files and noticed that I've preached on this passage quite a few times over the years, always right after Easter. This fact suggests that I probably don't have much new to say about it. But this is one of my favorite gospel stories for a couple reasons, one, that it involves fishing, and two, it involves that recalibrating and renegotiating that is a part growing up, part of adapting and maturing, part of deepening our experiences and commitments.

It is a natural transition point, a point when it would be feasible and easy to walk away. A moment between contracts, sort of speak, when you have an easy out.

People came to follow Jesus for many reasons. His miracles, his teachings, his attention to those who were marginalized or pushed aside by a religious culture that determined some clean and others unclean, some of the right blood and others outsiders. People followed Jesus for many reasons, but the twelve, the main group we hear so much about, including Peter and the others fishing in our story here, they were all invited by Jesus to leave their vocations and trajectories and come follow him. He invited them to be his students, to participate in his ministry, to be a part of his messianic vision. They followed for many reasons, but none of them anticipated the events of Holy Week. No one thought their beloved leader would suffer, die, and certainly no one, even if they were told, expected Jesus to rise again.

They have been through an intense moment. It was traumatic, I'm sure. They came face to face with threats of violence, of powers who have the authority to sentence one to death. They saw their leader suffer and die, went through that initial stage of mourning and grief. And then all of a sudden, just as they are grappling with the end of all their hopes and visions, Jesus appears again.

Yes, it all went differently than expected. And certainly, what they had known has now changed and whatever the future is, is probably going to feel very different on a day-to-day level. It is a natural point to step back, to step out, to reconsider whether they want to continue.

Peter's response is "I am going fishing." And the others said to him, "We will go with you." And so, "they went out and got into the boat." Why go fishing?

Now, I've often said that fishing, for the disciples, is not what you do on your day off. It is different than when I go fishing. For them, it's what you do to pay the bills, it a vocation, it their childhood roots, it is the familiar physical rhythm of grabbing the nets and knowing what to do in your body before your mind even has to think. It was their life when Jesus came on the scene, their vocation until Jesus said, follow me and you will fish for people.

I do wonder if for the disciples, they think that this ministry and messianic project is done, and they are figuring out what is next. Or maybe Peter and the others are discouraged and do not see themselves at the heart of Jesus' work anymore. It is a transition point, when they could easily walk away. This is all possible, all possible reasons for why they are back in their home area, back in their old boats, back in the old business.

I think there is something to that. But I was also thinking about being back on the water, back in the boat, back in the flow, the currents, the rippling sounds of water tickling against the boat. It is a place where one goes to process, to get relief, to clear one's head amidst the rocking motion of the water. There is a certain physicality to it, like going for a walk or doing something with your hands. There is a way of getting space and processing by not having to focus on the thing full force. Maybe this is why they go fishing.

Peter he was among the most fervent. He had proclaimed that he would follow till the death. He was the first to jump in, literally and figuratively. He was the most eager, most committed, most "wear your emotions on your sleeve" type. He was not the kind that discourages or gives up easily. Perhaps he is the canary in the coalmine; if Peter is questioning, maybe the rest should be also. Maybe that is why Peter is the focus again.

It was a transition point, a point when they could have easily moved on to something else. And so, it is interesting that John, the gospel writer, is ordering his gospel in a particular way. For John is telling us the story of a miraculous catch of fish not at the start of his gospel account, as Luke does, not when Jesus is first calling the disciples, but now at this juncture, after all that had happened. For John, the real moment of call comes now, in this moment when they could easily walk away, when they have a clearer picture of what it means to follow, of what it might cost, or the faith it might require, of their need for one another. It is at this juncture, when Jesus calls them again to leave their nets, and to follow. And just as the nets became bursting with fish, in Acts, we see the church bursting with those that

believe and follow in the way. It would have been an unfortunate moment for Peter and the others to walk away.

But it is interesting that John has Jesus calling the disciples to leave their nets and follow after a miraculous catch, not when they are fresh and wide-eyed, but after they had been through the harrowing journey of holy week.

This is the recalibrating part, the negotiating after you now have a better picture of what this is all about. Will you leave the nets then? Will you still follow, will you let go of the familiar and comfortable and stable and step out now?

I am aware this morning, as I preach on John 21 again, as I am sure you are, that next Sunday is my last Sunday with you. We are in a time of transition. Things haven't gone as expected in the last number of years for you that have been around a while, plans of buying property, building a building, having a building full of kids and young families. These old plans didn't pan out as expected. Ministry has emerged and morphed differently. And there are challenges in navigating the future which have contributed to this juncture, to my stepping out so that you have the room and freedom to explore other avenues that are more financially viable. But, the fact is, it creates a transition point, a point when it would be easy to pull away or move on.

I relate to the impulse to go fishing after an intense event or season. To fall into a familiar embodied rhythm as one takes a deep breath. I plan to go fishing the week of April 15. And again May 1-10, taking some time before having to decide on what is next for me. I relate to the impulse to go fishing, and I also relate to the moment of processing, of recalibrating the call and commitments of our lives. We sometimes have to take a breath, a moment, before we dive in again.

John records the miraculous catch of fish, as Luke does, but then he tells us of the breakfast scene, which is unique to John. Jesus cooks them breakfast on the shore. As they sit, Jesus asks Peter a question, the force of which is probably all in the delivery, the intonation. "So big shot, you thought you loved me more than everybody else, how's that going?" But that is not likely the intonation Jesus is using here. Sure, Jesus could have chided him, even mocked him. But there is a more gentle and tender aspect here, I sense.

Jesus is reaffirming who he knows Peter to be, coaxing out that heart and spirit again. Yes, we all need time to process and recalibrate, but we also have to get back to our hearts, to the call placed on our lives. "Do you love me more than these?" Peter had boasted that even if all fell away, he would not. Peter's fervency

and love was such that all the gospel writers tell of it. Jesus' question seems to be the penetrating question of a friend, seeking to restore Peter. Do you love me more than these? Peter's response is not full of the confidence he once had – yes Jesus you know I love you.

Three times Jesus asks the question to match the three times Peter denied knowing him, three questions around a *charcoal* fire, a detail we are given to link this with the charcoal fire in the courtyard when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Each time Jesus issues the call, feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Notice Jesus does not offer any platitudes of encouragement – such as, it was one time, we all make mistakes, I'm sure it won't happen again. Don't worry about it Peter, it's no big deal. I'm sure everything will go better next time. Jesus does not base anything in such shallow assertions. He asks only, do you love me. And he issues the call, feed my lambs.

It is a sober moment there in the quiet of the morning, by the crackling of the fire, after so much had transpired. A moment of calling, asking Peter to leave the world of fishing, to leave his home in Galilee once again and to carry on Jesus' work, to fish for people, to feed the lambs.

In this season of transition, I am going fishing. I encourage you to engage whatever activity you have that helps you take a deep breath, process, recalibrate. And then I hope you'll sit down to breakfast soon, whether it is fish over an open fire or not is up to you, and when you do, I hope you will hear Jesus' question addressed not just to Peter, but to you. Things may change and evolve in ways we didn't expect, but I'm pretty confident the call to follow Christ does not have an expiration date, only periods of renewal.

The call will come again, asking you, “do you love me,” and will you serve my kingdom. The call will come again. It will. But for now, let's go fishing.

And all God's people said... Amen.

John 21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin,^a Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards^b off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

^a Gk *Didymus*

^b Gk *two hundred cubits*