

“The Third Time”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 1, 2022

3rd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 30:1-5

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

John 21:1-14

Later – we’re not told how much later, but later – some of the disciples, at Peter’s urging, decide to go fishing. It seems that when they’re not certain what to do next, they go back to doing what they knew to do.

In a sense, the Gospel of John has two endings. The first, at the close of chapter twenty, brings the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to a close. While the disciples are gathered behind closed doors, Jesus comes among them and shows them his pierced hands and side; and he breathes into them the Holy Spirit. A week later, Jesus comes among them again, this time to prove to Thomas – who could not believe unless he saw for himself – that Jesus has, indeed, risen from the grave.

Now, in chapter twenty-one, we come to the gospel’s second ending. Many scholars argue that, because it disrupts the sense of closure in the preceding chapter, this must have been a later addition. And it is into the ordinariness of life – at night on the Sea of Galilee, out fishing – that Jesus appears to them for the third time.

It comes as no surprise to the readers of John’s Gospel that Jesus appears to them, on the beach, at daybreak. Jesus is the light of the world; and it will be in the light that the moment of recognition will take place.¹

All night, the disciples had been out on the lake, but they had caught nothing. Then, at the suggestion of the voice calling to them from the seashore, they put in their nets on the other side. The result is a catch of so many fish that they could not even haul the nets into the boat. The sign of abundance immediately leads the disciples to recognize the stranger standing on the beach.

Peter seems especially eager to see Jesus; he puts on his clothes and literally goes overboard, swimming to shore. This encounter mirrors the total immersion

¹ Karoline Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries

displayed at the foot washing, when Peter insisted, “Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my feet.” Just as Jesus had tied a towel around his waist, Peter here ties his coat to swim ashore.²

And just as Peter had been drawn to the charcoal fire in the courtyard outside of Pilate’s palace on the night Jesus was arrested, here Jesus has been preparing breakfast for the disciples on another charcoal fire; and invites them to come and eat. Next week, we will read about how Peter – who had denied Jesus at the night-time fire three times – is taken aside and asked three times by Jesus, “do you love me.” Grace is given even to the one who fallen farthest.

But, before this encounter, Jesus asks the disciples to bring their catch ashore. Even filled with so many big fish, the nets have not torn, they are intact; literally, there has been no “schism.” Jesus had prayed, before his death, that his beloved would always be unified. Now, Jesus shows them that – if they listen to his voice and follow his instructions, they could carry out their life’s work together, and with fruitful abundance.

Sometimes, as disciples of Jesus, we wonder when daylight will break, when all our hard work will pay off, when the nets will be full. Like those first followers, we live within the liminal, undefined space of sometime later. Without specific instructions otherwise, we go back to doing that which we know how to do, unable to imagine what it might be to throw our nets on the other side. We can see how rapidly the world around us is changing and know that the church will also need to change, but we can’t imagine how. Change is hard; and so, we resist it.

Despite a fruitless night fishing, the disciples put their nets down again, on the other side, and the catch is so large they can hardly bring it in. Here, in its closing chapter, the Gospel of John is reminding us of the abundant nature of God’s grace.

At the wedding of Cana, way back in the second chapter of John, when Jesus turned the water into wine, we are provided five details as indicators of abundance: there are six water jars, twenty to thirty gallons each, they are filled to the brim, they transform into the best wine, served at the end of the banquet. Here, in the disciples catch, we are also provided five details that show its abundance: the nets are so heavy they have to be hauled to shore, there are 153 fish, large fish, a variety of fish, the nets are not torn.

² Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*

God in the gospel of John is a God of provision and sustenance. Grace tastes like the best wine, like an abundance of fish. Grace comes as a result of the voice of Jesus and by following his commands, even if we don't initially recognize God's hand at work.

And so, it is here – at this breakfast on the beach, sitting around a charcoal fire – that the disciples receive a re-commissioning from the Lord. They are reminded of who they are and what they have been called to do. They are challenged to get back in the boat and try again; even if daylight has yet to break, even when change is hard.

One of my first – and least favorite – jobs after college was working at a phone bank for political fundraising. We were instructed to call the numbers on a list of previous donors and explain to them how important it was for them to reach down, deep and give more. I was not good at this. Many nights, I would hope and pray that – rather than having to read my prepared script describing how dire the situation was – no one would answer the phone.

I think that's a little like what many of us think when Jesus calls us to be disciples and cast our nets again and again. Those first disciples simply did as Jesus instructed, while we tend to say, "I hope no one is home." We might be afraid of a confrontation; or feel like we are trying to manipulate or force our beliefs on someone else. Proclaiming faith – especially using words – takes us out of our comfort zone.³

But our God – like the God in John's Gospel – is a God of provision and sustenance. Following the call of Jesus means putting your nets back into the sea even though you are tired and have not had success; it means placing our trust in God's abundant grace even in those times when we doubt our own intentions or abilities.

Surely, as the disciples sat with Jesus around the charcoal fire, having breakfast on the beach that morning, they recalled what he had said to them at the miraculous feeding of the 5000, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." And they, likely, also remembered how easily they – human as they are – wondered where the next meal was going to come from.

It can be so difficult for us to trust in God's provision and sustenance. With every new day, we imagine or feel new hungers. We look out onto the world and

³ Karyn Wiseman in *WorkingPreacher.com*

see further changes. We react with fear, or revert to the tried and true, or become frozen by inaction. We're tired and so don't want to put our nets out again; we dial the number but secretly hope no one is home.

Friends, if you are feeling weary or anxious or confused, Jesus comes to us again, this morning, saying, "come and eat." He has prepared a seat at this table and a meal for us to eat. While we call this the Lord's Supper, it is really more like a breakfast – here we are given sustenance and provision for the day that is just beginning. We will go out from here to meet many challenges, and opportunities as well, all through the abundant grace of God.

On this third time Jesus appears to his disciples, light breaks into the darkness. The risen Jesus is God's light to the world; and it is in the ordinariness of life – like a breakfast shared among friends – that the moment of recognition takes place. Amen.