

Jump In!

Genesis 3, John 21

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April 12, 2015

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 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.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' 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. 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 lake. 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 off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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.' 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.' 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. 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.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

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I've never been much of a fisherman.

Cane-pole fishing, maybe; bobbers and bream...but nothing more serious than that.

Still – with as little as I know about fishing, even I find Peter's attire (or, I should say, lack of attire) for his expedition a bit of a surprise.

What is not surprising is that Peter and some of the other disciples were back on a fishing boat.

Before they dropped their nets and followed Jesus around – feeding people, healing people, herding crowds, and witnessing a kind of love that...they believed...would change the world...before all of that Peter and those with him in the boat used to be fishermen.

There's an old saying, "when we don't know what to do, we do what we know."

What do you do after a week like the disciples had just been through? Jesus on trial, a crucifixion, rumors of an empty tomb, sightings of their risen Lord. What now? The disciples looked to Peter – whom Jesus had identified as the leader of the bunch – for guidance.

"I'm going fishing," he said. So they all climbed into the boat with him.

And they didn't catch a thing.

Doesn't that just add to misery?

They get back to the life they had before Jesus called them to something different and they spend all night on the water without catching a single thing!

They already felt lost.

Now they feel worthless.

And then, just before daybreak, they hear a voice that is coming from a stranger...someone who they can barely make out on account of time of day and the mist off the water. "Have you caught anything yet?"

I'm not much a fisherman – but I can tell you that fishermen hate being asked this question.

"No!"

"Well, why don't you cast your net over there to the right...you might find some fish there."

"Gee...thanks! I wish we had thought about that six hours ago. We've just assumed that all of the fish swam on the LEFT side of the boat!"

"Casting the net now! On the RIGHT side of the boat!"

"See! I told you!"

The Beloved Disciple figured it out first: "It is the Lord!"

Now imagine what Peter must have been feeling in that moment.

Peter – who just a few days before – after he said that he wouldn't – denied Jesus three times. Peter – who ran to the tomb after hearing from Mary that it was empty – but who, then, turned around and went back home because he didn't quite know what to make of the news. Peter – the disciple whom Jesus picked from the bunch and called to a special duty... "Peter, you are the rock," Jesus said, "upon you, I will build my church" – but who, instead of building the church, gave up and went fishing. Imagine what Peter must have felt like when he saw Jesus standing there on the beach.

The first thing Peter did was put on his clothes and jump in the lake – because he had been naked.

I don't know of a stranger verse in all of scripture than this one.

Setting aside why Peter went fishing in his birthday suit, the corollary question is just as confounding: why would Peter then choose to put on his clothes in order to jump in the lake? Wouldn't it be logical to do that the other way around?

I've always imagined this as Peter's "Forrest Gump sees Lieutenant Dan" moment. You remember that scene from the movie...where Forrest Gump is out on the water, alone, in his shrimping boat and he sees his old friend and Army buddy Lieutenant Dan on the dock. Forrest smiles, and waves, and then – because he is so excited – he jumps off the boat and starts swimming toward his friend.

I've always imagined that is what Peter was like when he saw Jesus standing on the shore. I could just never understand why Peter felt the need to put his clothes back on to do it.

But now I'm not so sure if the emotion that Peter felt was joy.

Thinking about the scriptures, I remember another time someone felt the need to "cover up" when they encountered God. Before they succumbed to the serpent's temptations, Adam and Eve strolled through Eden "naked and unashamed." After they were tempted, they covered themselves with fig leaves and hid when they heard God walking in the garden.

I can't help but notice that Peter's instinct was the same as Adam's and Eve's. The first thing Peter did when he saw Jesus was to cover up his shame. Jesus had encountered Peter at his most vulnerable. It is one thing to put on our Sunday best and come meet Jesus and the other nice people in church. We know how to prepare for that. It is quite another thing to encounter Jesus in the midst of our everyday life

– when we might behave a little differently. That’s how Jesus found Peter – and Peter wasn’t prepared for it – so he covered himself back up and jumped in the lake.

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One of my preaching professors, Anna Carter Florence, described that swim that Peter made from the boat to the shore as a metaphor for our walk of faith.

Because it is a paradox – right? Peter wanted to get to Jesus. He wanted to be with Jesus so badly that he couldn’t even wait for to turn the rudder and adjust the sails on the boat! But Peter was also aware of the things in his life – the things he had done (and not done) that put distance between him and Jesus. He was conflicted.

Have you ever tried to swim in your clothes? It’s a hard slog. The clothes get heavy. Movement is much more difficult. You start to sink. Peter jumped out of the boat – but the swim was a struggle.

And yet when Peter arrived on the shore, Jesus welcomed him with a charcoal fire and breakfast. Bread and fish. I wonder how many loaves there were, and how many fish? I wonder whether the disciples remembered another time Jesus offered that meal?

I think the charcoal fire must have been especially poignant for Peter. Not too long ago, Peter had been warming himself by the heat of a charcoal fire outside the gate of the High Priest while Jesus was being tried as a criminal.

“You’re not one of this man’s disciples are you?” someone asked.

“No, I am not.”

And then someone asked again...

“No, I am not.”

And again...

“Did I not see you in the garden with him?”

“No.”

As Peter smelled that charcoal fire on the beach, I imagine he remembered the fire outside the High Priest’s gate. That is what our sense of smell can do – it can be a conduit for memory...good and bad.

Except, by the warm of this charcoal fire, it was Jesus who asked the question:

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Feed my lambs.

And again...

Simon son of John, do you love me?

Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Tend my sheep.

And again...

Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.

Feed my sheep.

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Don't you know that this is the way God still calls those who make up the church?
Those of us who participate in this holy and human experiment that Jesus built upon
the testimony of Peter?

That's the good news about Easter.

Christ meets us where we are – not when we are all gussied up and acting the part –
but when we are in the midst of our everyday...navigating the space between our
hopes and our disappointments...unprepared for something as significant as an
encounter with God.

But then that call comes. And it clarifies things.

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

Then feed my sheep.

And that is when those of us who make up the church find the freedom to set aside
our shame and get to work.

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