

**Holy Mackerel**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**John 21: 1-19**  
**4-10-2016**

Peter was understandably tired. The last few weeks had been hectic: a triumphant entry into Jerusalem; a last meal together; the trial and execution of Jesus; his burial; several appearances by Jesus after his death, and way too much time hiding from the authorities in a dark, cramped room.

And Peter's head must have been spinning with internal questions: What do all of these events mean? For Jesus? For me? For all of creation? And what's next? And what's my role in all of this?

And at some point, Peter thought to himself, "I need to clear my head." So he does the most logical thing he's done in all of John's gospel up to this point: He decides to go on a staycation. That's right, he makes up his own 'Gone Fishin'' sign, and heads for the Sea of Galilee. "You comin'?" he asks the other disciples. And everyone agrees: "Road Trip!!!" So off they go.

And it turns out that the disciples' fishing trip was like every fishing trip I've ever been on that didn't include a stocked pond or a professional angler – it was empty – they caught nothing!!!

But something tells me this fishing trip provided much needed rest and clarity.

As the boat makes its way to shore, they notice a strange man standing on the beach. And he notices them. And he also notices their boat is empty. "Children, you have no fish, do you?"

“Nope,” they say, “The fish aren’t biting today.”

The stranger offers some advice: “Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”

Remember how I told you I thought the disciples found rest and clarity on their fishing trip? I think this is the first example. They don’t roll their eyes. They don’t dismiss the advice of the stranger. They don’t tell him to mind his own business. Instead, they trust the stranger’s instincts and follow his instructions.

Next thing you know, their net is filled with fish – it’s so full, the net can barely contain its contents. And it’s so full, it’s too heavy to be hauled into the boat. In fact, the net is comically big, perhaps so big, that it lifts the nose of the boat out of the water, as the vessel struggles to carry it to shore.

In the midst of this happy chaos, the beloved disciple senses immediately that the stranger is Jesus, and proclaims to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Upon hearing this, Peter jumps into the sea, and makes a bee-line for the shore, swimming for Jesus just as fast as he can.

This verse makes me think of scenes in the movie *Forest Gump* – the scene where Forest abandons his Oyster Boat to enthusiastically greet his friend Lt. Dan; or the one where he swims to shore without a minute to lose in attending to his sick mother. Peter runs to Jesus with every ounce of devotion and energy.

And can you see behind Peter? That boat, being tugged by a huge fish-ball and manned by a half-dozen disciples filled with joy and amazement, each one desperately trying to stay upright and wrangle fish and wave hello to Jesus all at the same time. And of course the beloved disciple, sitting in the boat, lost in the moment, eyes fixed on Jesus, too busy being all-theological to be of any use to the crew.

And can you see in front of Peter? There is Jesus, wearing a cat-that-ate-the-canary kind of grin. And he thinks to himself, “I love these knuckleheads!!!”

Jesus sits back in his lawn chair, and stokes a charcoal fire as he waits for the disciples to make it ashore. Once everyone’s on the beach, Jesus invites them to a cookout. The old friends share a breakfast of grilled fish and bread. And once more, we can tell the fishing trip has done the disciples some good. They simply enjoy the presence of God in their midst. There’s no jockeying for Jesus’ favor. There’s no deep theological debate. There’s just silence; and perhaps the occasional grunt of satisfaction that accompanies full stomachs; and stillness; and peace; and maybe even a sunrise. Jesus is in their midst. And that’s enough.

After breakfast, Jesus pulls Peter aside, and asks the same question three times: “Do you love me?” Each time Peter responds with fervor: “Yes, Lord! You know that I love you!!!”

With each confirmation, Jesus gives Peter a command: “Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.”

Jesus is commissioning and blessing Peter to lead the disciples, and in fact, what is to become the Church. But this commissioning also comes with a warning: Feeding sheep and tending lambs will bring hardship and persecution. Up until this point, Peter has followed a path of his own choosing. Now, Peter will follow a path that will not be comfortable.

Jesus tells Peter, "I know you love me. I know you are sincere. And now, you must follow me."

And poof. Just like that our lection concludes. It's a strange text really. It's an epilogue or an encore. An extra chapter after the Easter narrative. But it's a necessary epilogue.

Thomas Troeger writes that this epilogue "tells us the curtain may have come down on John's narrative, but the real life drama of Christ is continuing." Jesus may be gone, but the miracles don't cease. Nets still fill up with fish in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The disciples shared a last meal together, but communion can always be resurrected, even in an impromptu fish-fry on the beach. Jesus may no longer be physically present with Peter, but the resurrected Jesus will be present as Peter follows his footsteps into places of pain and hardship and uncertainty.

My friend Nancy Davis is a story-teller. And she says that any good story should always begin: "A long time ago, but not so long ago that it couldn't have happened yesterday..."

I think this is the power of John's gospel, and particularly its epilogue. Two thousand years ago, Jesus encountered people who felt alienated and abandoned. He poured out his love and his hospitality, and in so doing well water became living water; water basins became wine jugs, a can of sardines and a pack of saltines became food for five thousand; a cup of wine and a hunk of bread became an invitation to the life abundant. It was two thousand years ago, but it all could have happened yesterday.

And as a matter of fact, it could even happen today. Somewhere in Charlotte, somebody is Samaritized by stigma, and perhaps like the Samaritan woman at the well, they are seeking the social shelter of noon-day heat – rather than a well, perhaps it's a bus stop, or church narthex, or even a bathroom. We can offer them living water. Somewhere in Charlotte, a family feels embarrassed or ashamed, unable to provide in ways they wish they could, and so they serve water to wedding guests. We can offer them the sweet wine of community. Somewhere in Charlotte, a group of neighbors struggles to find a meal; we've got more than enough in our lunch pails to share. Somewhere in Charlotte, someone has been told they don't belong, they're too broken to be included. We can invite them to our table. Somewhere in this city, there are twelve basketfuls of provisions, and living wells deeper than Jacob could imagine, and nets just waiting to burst at the seams with Galilean fish, and truth and abundance beyond our imagination.

Friends, a long time ago, John the evangelist penned a story about a man named Jesus, one whose truth would bring us life. It's an old, old story. But not so old that it couldn't have happened yesterday. And if we believe that truth, it's a story that can happen today, and tomorrow, and the next day.

Holy mackerel, I hope so!!! Amen.