

Don't Turn Back

Have you ever been so discouraged in trying to live as a Christian that you were seriously tempted to give up and go back to where you were before you started? This was a major temptation for the Children of Israel after Moses led them out of their slavery in Egypt. It is clear that they didn't like being slaves. When God appeared to Moses from a burning bush, God told Moses that He was talking to him because He had heard the cries of His people in Egypt. And, because they had cried out to God for deliverance, He was now calling Moses to go to Egypt and lead them from bondage to freedom.

Moses did what God asked him to do and God was faithful in going with Moses and giving him the ability to perform signs and wonders to confirm the authority of his word both to Pharaoh and to the Israelites. And when the time to leave Egypt finally came, the Israelites were happy enough to leave. They were excited about being free and about going to a Promised Land that flowed with milk and honey, but it wasn't long until they became discouraged. As slaves in Egypt they had food to eat, a roof over their heads, and relative security. But, as pilgrims in the wilderness, they found that food was scarce; they had to live in tents and do a lot of traveling over difficult terrain; they had to deal with the threat of wild animals: lions, wolves, scorpions, and snakes--Yikes! And, it wasn't long until the Children of Israel wanted to go back to Egypt. In their discouragement they grumbled against Moses, their leader and against God, their Savior. **They wanted to go back to Egypt!**

In our Scripture lesson this morning, Peter tries to go back. It had been too long since Peter and the others had seen or experienced the presence of their resurrected Lord. Doubts and fears had crept back in to their hearts and minds. Peter suggests a solution and the others follow: John 21:1-3a say, "Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 'I'm going out to fish,' Simon Peter told them, and they said, 'We'll go with you.'"

What we need to understand here is that Peter was not taking himself and those with him on a little diversion. It wasn't as if he had said, "let's go play a round of golf," or "let's go bowling." He didn't even suggest a little boat ride to do some sightseeing. No, Peter and those with him were professional fishermen, and they

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were going out to fish, back to fishing. They had been called out of fishing for fish to fish for men but now they were attempting to go back for fish. It's a clear case of discouragement, impatience, and rebellion against God.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about? Maybe you are on the edge of being there this morning? Following Christ, resisting temptation, has proven to be harder than you thought it would be when you began your journey. It's been a while since you've felt much spiritual excitement. It was a real struggle for you to get up and come to church this morning. You are being tempted to quit, tempted to turn back, tempted to go back to something more familiar and more applauded by the world. **Egypt begins to look pretty good.**

Well, Peter and company took a stab at going back, and what they discovered is this: John 21:3b says, "So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing." The professional fishermen fished all night and caught nothing, nada, zip, zero, nothing at all. Going back led to complete futility. One time a long time ago I tried going back, or at least going somewhere different. I was frustrated by how things were going in the church I served and I was tired of the stress of trying to move things forward. Somewhere inside myself I said: "this is too hard and I'm not going to do this anymore. I like working with wood, so I'm going to go build cabinets for a living." So, that's what I did. I worked at a cabinet shop for a time and then tried to open one of my own. For a little while it was refreshing. But then it was disappointing. It didn't matter that I wasn't making any money; what mattered was meaning. What I was doing didn't have any meaning. God had called me to a place where my life had meaning and I tried to find meaning somewhere else. It didn't work. It took me a fall and a winter to figure it out, but by the next spring I was on my way here to Fourth Street. In that other life I wasn't catching any fish, any life, and I soon knew I wouldn't. Following your own whims when God has called you to a mission for Him won't work. **It only leads to futility.**

What we see in our Scripture lesson this morning is a movement from discouragement to rebellion, followed by a movement from rebellion to futility. The next movement that we see in Peter and company is the movement from futility to an acknowledgement of their failure. John 21:4-5 say, "Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, 'Friends, haven't

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you any fish?' 'No,' they answered."

It is always difficult to face our failures, and to acknowledge our sins. I can't say that I have met many people who are searching for this: "Please show me my failure; please, please, confront me with my sin!" Most of us find that sort of thing very unpleasant, something to be avoided at all cost. But we need to understand that facing failure and confronting sin are absolutely necessary corrections for when we've rebelled and gone astray. It's encouraging to note in this passage that Jesus is gentle, even playful in His rebuke. He already knows that they haven't caught any fish and He acknowledges as much in His question: "Haven't you caught any fish?" They have no choice but to agree and answer truthfully, "no," we haven't any fish."

The question I have for you is this: Are you there yet? Are you willing and ready to admit that every attempt to find real peace, lasting joy, and a sustainable meaning for your life outside the will of God, has failed? Are you willing to acknowledge that although sin gives pleasure for a season, it only leads to heartache and death at the end? Have you given up all hope of finding life in sin?

There was a word added to our collective vocabulary through the war in Iraq. It was coined by Donald Rumsfeld to describe the die-hard fanatical Islamic terrorists who are committed to continue their war against Western Civilization until they give up their lives to the cause. Rumsfeld called them "dead-enders." **Seeking to find life for ourselves outside the call of Christ is also a "dead-ender."**

The great thing--and it is a very great thing--about being forced to confront our failure and to acknowledge our sin is that it brings us to the end of our own resources and impels us to move in a new direction. The fourth movement in our Scripture lesson today is repentance. It is the movement from acknowledgement of our sin to obedience or to a renewed obedience to God. The opportunity for renewed obedience in our Scripture Lesson comes in John 21:6: "He said, 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.'" Jesus was saying in effect: "Now that you know the futility that comes from working according to your own agenda, try seeing what happens when you work under my direction." The movement from acknowledgement of our sins to obedience moves quickly then to a movement from obedience to "fecundity" which means an

abundant fruitfulness. Without Jesus, the disciples fished all night and caught nothing, but when they had the opportunity to fish according to His command, they suddenly took in a tremendous catch. Their nets were full and running over. Their boat was full and running over. Their hearts were suddenly full and running over. **Obedience to Christ leads to abundance of life.**

So we see a progression in our Scripture Lesson today. There is movement from discouragement to rebellion and disobedience, movement from rebellion and disobedience to futility, movement from futility to the acknowledgement of sin, movement from the acknowledgement of sin to repentance and obedience, and movement from repentance and obedience to overflowing fruitfulness and an abundance of life. There are two other movements in today's Scripture: there is the movement from fruitfulness and abundance of life to a recognition of Jesus Christ risen from the dead and the movement from recognition of Jesus Christ risen from the dead to a renewed and intimate fellowship with Him.

John 21:7-9 say. "Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, 'It is the Lord,' he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread."

It is very important for us to see the order in which this is presented to us. Recognition of and encounter with the risen Christ follows repentance and obedience. Faith precedes sight. Obedience precedes enlightenment. If you want to know that Jesus is alive from the dead, if you want to encounter Him, then obey His commands, respond to His calling in your life. What is it that the Holy Spirit has laid on your heart to do for God? What sins need to be acknowledged and laid aside? What persons are you being led to pray for and witness to? Where is God asking you to invest time, money, and talent? Step out in faith and obey God. It is there that He will meet you and make Himself known to you. **Faith and obedience precede fresh encounters with the living Christ.**

The last movement in our Scripture text this morning is the movement from an encounter with the living Christ to a renewed

and intimate fellowship with Him. John 21:10-14 say, "Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.' Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead."

Sooner or later it's probably going to happen. You are going to get discouraged. You are going to get cold feet. You are going to get weary. And, in your discouragement, fear, and weariness, you are going to be tempted to go back. But, let me assure you, there is nothing to go back to. You won't find the life you are looking for in the world of sin. The grass may look greener and sweeter on the other side of the fence, but that is only an illusion. The way to go is forward. The way to go forward is by faith. If by faith you will turn away from your sin and obey God, sooner or later you will have an encounter with God; your eyes and your heart will be opened to behold His glory. More than that, you will discover that as long as you desire to be with Him, He will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you always.

The path of Christian discipleship is not easy. It takes us through the wilderness and across deserts, but if we commit to stay the course and keep following Him, we will not be disappointed. Jesus will come to us and make Himself known to us. He will satisfy us with the abundance of our lives made fruitful by His Spirit, **He will allow us the joyful experience of abiding in His love.**

Beloved, don't turn back. No matter how hard it gets or how lonely it feels, don't turn back. Jesus will be with us if we will be with Him.

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John 21:1-14

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