

In Luke's gospel we read the account of Peter's third denial: upon being questioned a third time, the once bold and brash disciple says, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" Luke then tells us, "at that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And [Peter] went out and wept bitterly.

Surely this is one of the most heart-breaking scenes in the Bible. It gathers its emotive power precisely because each one of us can recall a time in our own lives when we have looked someone in the eye who has betrayed us or have received a glance of disbelief from someone we've just stabbed in the back.

Betrayal takes time to heal. As adults we seldom recover fully when someone has broken faith with us – whether in friendships or in marriages. I can only imagine the look that Jesus gave Peter upon witnessing his betrayal. Was it a repelling look? A look of rejection? That would explain why Peter ran away and "wept bitterly".

All we can do is speculate, but our speculations might take a different shape if we pay attention to this morning's gospel text.

We might find it odd that after two memorable encounters with Jesus in Judea and having heard his command to go out into the world, we might find the disciples back at their old game of fishing on the sea of Galilee. They had followed Jesus for three years, had had their hopes of a warrior Messiah dashed in the brutality of the crucifixion, had been given new hope and a sense of calling when they encounter the risen Lord, so... they decide to go fishing.

Then again, maybe that is the most normal thing in the world. It takes time for all of the pieces in a person's life to line up and in this epilogue to John's gospel, we see that there's still some unfinished business left in Peter's. And so he does what any of the rest of us would do when there are loose ends – he returns to what he knows best and what he feels good about. He may not be the stalwart man of faith, but he knows how to fish.

What's interesting about this scene is that some of the other disciples are with him. They didn't abandon Thomas in his struggle for faith, and they don't let go of Peter during his.

After a disappointing night on the lake, Jesus appears on the shore, yet the disciples do not know who it is. So he says, "Lads, you have no fish, why don't you try the right side of the boat." For some reason, maybe because they've got nothing better to do, they decide to give it a try. As they haul in an astonishingly large catch of fish, they recognize their risen friend and Lord.

John tells us that the disciples are silent, so it is Jesus who speaks first – after breakfast he asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these”. It’s tough to say what “these” refers to, but I would hazard a guess that Jesus is referring to fish and fishing. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

Three times Jesus asks Peter for a confession of faith, and each more anguished than the last: "Lord, you know everything, you know my weakness, you know my love." Jesus is not letting Peter forget his betrayal, and Peter knows it.

It’s a hard scene to imagine, but it’s not hard to see that Peter is loved in this encounter. Love surrounds the moment of the confrontation and makes it possible. “Nothing”, Jesus says “even death and betrayal, can separate you, Peter, from my love. By this, you are forgiven and freed and called again. By my love you are healed.” The encounter of this disciple with the crucified and Risen Sovereign revealed at least three things:

Peter had to face the truth about himself;
He had to be forgiven and healed so he could be a disciple;
He had to be freed for the next steps of the journey.

Because we’ve been journeying through John this season of Lent, we know that Jesus' repetition isn't meant as rebuke but as absolution: three invitations to confess in order to wipe away three denials just days earlier. It is painful, we can assume some anger and frustration on Peter’s part – even tears. But in and through this tri-fold pattern of question and confession Peter is restored – to himself, to his Lord, to the discipleship community. But there’s something more, too, for Peter is not merely forgiven and restored but also commissioned. Peter is given work to do that matters – that is how he knows that he has been restored, he is given responsibility. He is placed again into the key pastoral role among the disciples. He is to nurture the sheep that belong to Christ. Jesus meets Peter in his despair and invites him to follow.

So where will Jesus meet you?

Where do you find yourself in this narrative? I wonder if Peter's "boredom" – the thing that led him to go fishing reverberates in our lives also? I don’t mean "boredom" in the sense that you don’t have anything to do, that you have time on your hands. Most of those I talk to have far more to do than you can ever hope to find time for. But I wonder if you feel boredom in the sense that you’re just plodding along on a course that you’re not even sure you chose - "waiting for something to happen;" getting lost in the daily grind. Maybe sometimes we feel like we measure our lives in diapers changed, lawns mowed, papers written and tuition bills paid. Sometimes we feel like all we have to look forward to is enjoying brief respites from our duties with a vacation here or there . . . and every now and then, in a moment of anxiety, we stop and dare to ask: “is that what life is really all about?”

What would it look like for Jesus to appear on the shore of your life? To pull you away from the place where discipleship is impossible because you believe that somehow you’ve failed? What will it take for Jesus to restore you?

A couple of weeks ago, a friend was sharing a story about a member of her congregation named Mike who took part in one of their church's mission trips to Haiti 15 years ago. Mike was a high level engineer with Boeing and he was not really keen on talking about his faith, but he had some pretty unique skills as a result of his training and education. Their group was primarily composed of contractors and engineers and they set out to a remote village in Eastern Haiti that did not have access to clean drinking water. The problem that they set out to resolve was creating a rudimentary purification plant and water transport system so that the village could have access. After two weeks of nearly constant labor, they were successful. The team went back home over the weekend, and on Monday Mike went back to work.

But an unexpected thing took place as he sat in his office in Everett, Washington. He was seized by the kind of ennui that I described a minute ago. He came to the realization that two paths were being set out before him. I could continue my work here in my office, knowing that if I left Boeing, I would be replaced within a few weeks. Or I could quit my job and move down to Haiti and provide water to people – something that no one else seems to be doing right now. He talked about it with his wife, expecting her to talk him down from the crazy ledge he had gotten himself up to, but she said. I think God may be calling you to this. Two weeks later, he quit his job, asked his church to support him. Now 15 years later, he has laid down over three hundred miles of pipe and provided clean water to thousands of people.

The story doesn't end there. As I said, Mike was reticent about talking about his faith – I'm a doer, not a talker. But some of the local ministers and mission partners said, why don't you just tell some folks why you're doing this. After a while their persistence wore on him and he relented. O.K. I'll say a few words. When the time came for him to speak at one of the local missions, he said only a few sentences communicating that he did what he did because he was grateful for what Christ had done for him. Then he sat down. Before he knew what was happening, a wave of revivals were taking place all around the places along the three hundred miles of pipeline where Mike had created access points for the people to fetch their water.

Perhaps God is not calling you to quit your job and move to Haiti. But, like Peter, God is calling you to feed his sheep. Jesus has come alongside you and told you that you and he are reconciled; that there is nothing that you can do that would chase him away. And now that same God has entrusted you with something to do.

Do you love him? Then trust that he has something meaningful for you to do even in the concrete reality of your present circumstances.