

In today's Gospel we have Jesus making an encore Easter appearance (Jn ch21, bulletins). Last week, we heard the end of John ch20. Things seemed like they were all wrapped up and concluded neatly. It would seem there was nothing left for Jesus to do. He gave his life on the cross. He rose from the grave. He appeared to his disciples. He gave them the Holy Spirit. He commissioned them to be his ambassadors to the world. But then, in ch21, after doing all that, Jesus makes one more appearance. And he does it out of love and concern for one of his disciples. He does it as an offering of love for one man: Simon Peter.

John ch21, v2 We're told that seven of the disciples have left Jerusalem and gone back home to Galilee. Why in heaven's name would they do that? They had just seen Jesus Christ risen from the dead. They had just been witnesses at God's defeat of the powers of death and evil.

So why did they go home? I suspect the reason is this: they really don't know what else to do. After the incredible roller coaster ride of Jesus' death and resurrection, I think the disciples enter a hazy period. They enter the spiritual fog. They're not sure what to do. So they return to the familiar. They go back to Galilee. They've had an incredible mountain top experience in Jerusalem. But now they're back down in the valley and unsure of what to do with their lives. That's a common spiritual condition. I know I've experienced it, and I suspect you have too. You have a powerful spiritual experience. Then you're not sure what to do next. That's where the disciples are. And on top of that, Peter still has some unresolved issues in his life, and we'll get to those in a few moments.

So v3, Peter has nothing better to do. So he decides to take the old boat out and go fishing. He's going back to his old way of life before he met Jesus. And the other 6 have nothing better to do, so they join Peter out on the lake. But even back in the old familiar patterns of their former lives, things are not working out. End of v3. They're out there all night, and they catch nothing. The spiritual fog must have felt even thicker.

But then, v4, at daybreak, Jesus appears. At first, they don't recognize him. He yells from the shore, “Hey, have you guys caught anything?” They answer, “No.” So he tells them, v6, “Try fishing on the right side of the boat.”

And all of a sudden they catch so many fish that they couldn't haul the nets in. In Luke, we're told that the same thing had happened several years earlier on the day Jesus called them to be his disciples. This is “*déjà vu* all over again.” And it's at that moment, v7, that John recognizes who it is. So John tells Peter, v7, “It's the Lord.”

And Peter gets so excited that he puts on his clothes and jumps in the water and heads for shore. Peter is full of mixed emotions. He wants to greet Jesus with respect, and so he puts his clothes on. But he apparently wants to greet Jesus immediately, and so he jumps in the water and swims, instead of waiting for the boat to get to shore.

And when they get to the shore, v9 Jesus already has a fire going, and fish on the grill. He says, “Come and have breakfast.” And so they sit down together to eat.

Now, you may think that that fire is just an incidental detail. But it's actually crucial to what happens next. And it's also crucial to understanding why Jesus is putting in this encore appearance.

Notice the description in v9: “a charcoal fire.” Peter gets to shore and sees a charcoal fire. Now usually, the Greek word for fire is “pyr.” That's where we get words like pyrotechnics and pyromania. But here John uses a different word. He used the word anthrakia. A few of you might recognize anthrakia as the root of the English word anthracite, which is a type of coal. Anthrakia means a coal or a charcoal fire.

And do you know what? The word anthrakia only appears one other time in the entire Bible. It appears a few chapters earlier in John 18. On the night of Jesus' arrest, John tells us that some of the High Priest's slaves had built a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. And remember who was there with them: Peter.

It is by that first charcoal fire that Peter denied being one of Jesus' disciples. And then, while warming himself, he denied him again. And then, he denied him a third time.

So, now in ch21, Peter is sitting by a second charcoal fire. And it's almost certain that he's thinking about that first charcoal fire. He invariably is thinking about how he denied Jesus 3 times.

Peter had messed up big time. I suspect that this is part of the reason for his spiritual fog. He remembers the glory of the past. But he also remembers how badly he screwed up. And it's weighing heavily upon him.

So, v15, Jesus takes matters into his own hands. We have this wonderful scene of Jesus giving Peter three chances to undo his denial. Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to proclaim his love three times.

“Simeon bar Jonah; Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

“Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

“Simon son of John, do you love me?”

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

“Feed my sheep.”

Peter gave three denials by one charcoal fire. And by another charcoal fire, Jesus gives Peter three chances to affirm his love. And then, Jesus tells Peter what will happen to him. v18 When he's older he's going to be tied up and taken where he doesn't want to go. In v19

John says this points ahead to Peter’s death 35 years later, fastened upside down to a Roman cross. And finally, Jesus gives Peter his final marching orders: “Follow me.”

Peter is paralyzed by the past. Jesus points him to the future. Peter is stuck in the pain of three denials. Jesus offers him three chances to take them back. Peter is stuck in the fog of not knowing what to do. Jesus offers him a clear mission: feed my lambs, feed my sheep, follow me. Simon bar Jonah, man adrift, becomes Simon Peter, apostle, preacher, teacher, leader of the church, and martyr. Peter is forever changed by this last encounter with Jesus. Peter is transformed.

In a few weeks, we at St. Paul’s are going to begin our year of centennial celebration. We’ll be looking back in thanksgiving for our first 100 years of ministry.

Peter was paralyzed by his past and didn’t know how to move forward. By contrast, we have much to celebrate in our past. We can give thanks for the pioneering spirit that brought this church to Lubbock. We can give thanks for the men and women who worked long and hard to build this church.

In fact, to help us in looking back, Rodney Goebel has prepared a wonderful book that’s going to be available soon called “A Look Back in Time.” It is a history of St. Paul’s, with an especial focus on one of our toughest periods, the time of the Great Depression and World War II, the time period, paradoxically, when this building was built. We have much to be thankful for about our past.

In fact, in the forward to the book, the current rector of St. Paul’s put’s it well. I think I’ll quote him:

“As the eighth rector and twenty-first priest to lead St. Paul’s, I am keenly aware of the enormous debt owed to my predecessors and the faithful people they served... We are able to gaze at new horizons of ministry in the twenty-first century solely because we are beneficiaries and heirs of those who have gone before.”¹

We can be thankful for the past. But make no mistake, if we live and minister exactly like we did in the past, St. Paul’s will not be around to celebrate it’s bicentennial. If we try to move forward in the 21st Century trying to do things the same way we did them in the 20th century, we’re dead in the water.

We’re in the midst of tremendous changes in our culture and in our churches. As I’ve said before, our culture is increasingly spiritual, but not religious. And for many years now, mainline churches, including the Episcopal Church, and yes, including St. Paul’s have been on the decline.

As I’ve also said before, we’re in the greatest time of change and ferment in the past half-millennium.

¹ JPH, forward to *A Look Back in Time*, p. 5

We can do nothing and shrink until everyone dies off, and the last person left can shut the doors and turn off the lights.

Or we can move forward, make the changes we need to make, and carry on our mission in the 21st century.

Peter was once a successful fisherman. But after Jesus resurrection, going back to fishing as usual didn't work. Jesus called him to step up, to step out, and to begin to minister in a different way.

“Feed my sheep. Follow me.”

Jesus called Peter to transformation. And Jesus calls us to transformation. Jesus calls us to live fully as his people. Jesus calls us to live fully into the roles he has created for us. Not the ministries and roles of our parents and grandparents. But the ministries he's created for us in this century, in the second hundred years of our existence.

Be thankful for the past. But don't be paralyzed by the past.

We need to hear and heed Jesus' voice in a new century: 'Feed my sheep. And follow me.'