

AN EASTER WILDERNESS
The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(05/21/2023)

Scripture Lessons: John 6:1-15; 21:1-17

“Simon Peter said [to the other disciples], ‘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.” (John 21:3)

“And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here.” (St. Augustine)

Today is the seventh Sunday of the Easter season. It is the liturgical season when we reflect on those passages of scripture that describe the disciples’ experience of the risen Christ. This season culminates in the disciples’ experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This was when Jesus’ followers made the transition from disciples to apostles, from people who heard the Word to people who proclaimed the Word not only verbally, in their teaching and preaching, but also in the way they lived their lives.

Some of the stories in the Bible are history, but even the ones that are history are more than history. The message they convey is deeply symbolic. The stories, parables, encounters, events are about us, about our individuation, about our becoming the unique incarnations of God’s creative Spirit that we are called to be. Like myth, the stories we read in the Bible may or may not be historically true, but they are psychologically and spiritually true. The historical figures of the Bible, which are presented as external, *including God, including Jesus*, are also a part of us.

When we grasp this distinction between the factual and the poetic, the outer and the inner, the historical and the spiritual, and then when we dissolve the false dichotomy between the two seemingly incompatible opposites, we realize that we, like Mary, can give birth to the Christ in our lives. We realize that we, like the rich young man, may become so attached to our possessions that we fail to experience the kingdom of God. We realize that we, like Peter, deny our relationship with our Lord many times in our daily lives; we act like we never knew him. We realize that we, like Jesus, like Paul, need to die to our old self to be reborn in the kingdom of God.

Following Jesus’ crucifixion, his disciples felt lost, disoriented, discouraged, and depressed. They were grieving not only their Lord’s death; they were grieving their future, their vision of a future wherein they could work together with Jesus to bring about the kingdom of God on earth—and perhaps also kick out the Romans. The vision around which they had built their lives over the past three years seemed to be slipping away.

Following Jesus' death, the disciples enter what could be called a wilderness experience. We should note that the initial call to become disciples of the Way also drew them into a wilderness experience. The disciples left their lives, their livelihoods, their families, even their religion to become disciples of an itinerant preacher and healer.

There are times in life when, like the disciples, we *choose* to step outside our comfort zone. There are other times in our lives when we do not make the choice; life makes it for us. Life draws us forth into the wilderness or it blasts us out of our comfort zone. The loss of a job or a career identity, e.g., through retirement, can pull us into the wilderness. A life-threatening illness or a serious disability can do this. This is, of course, in addition to external precipitating factors like the wars that have devastated the peoples of Ukraine and Sudan; those who have lost all they had through floods or fires; those who, because of famine, are not able to feed their children.

Every time we step outside or are driven outside our comfort zone, we enter the wilderness. When we are in the throes of a wilderness experience, the resources we previously utilized in the living of our life no longer prove adequate. We need to develop new resources, perhaps a new understanding of who we are, perhaps a new attitude toward life, perhaps even a new understanding of God, a new relationship with God. The wilderness experience is not always a pleasant experience; in fact, it is seldom a pleasant experience. It usually involves suffering. This suffering, however, is more meaningful than the neurotic suffering we will experience if we do not move forward into the new situation, if we do not try to make a new and healthier adaptation to life.

The existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has said that those struggles that do not destroy us will make us stronger. We cannot ask God to bless us with a life that is free of struggle. Without the wilderness experience, there is no growth. Without the breaking of the old container, we will be unable to fashion a new and better one. Without fashioning new wine skins, we will not be able to contain the expanding, effervescent, joyful presence of the Holy Spirit. If we trust in God, our struggles will not destroy us; they will strengthen us. They will usher in the psychological and spiritual transformation that can attend and then follow the darkest moments of our lives.

The period following Jesus' death is a dark time for the disciples. Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb and experiences the presence of her risen Lord. Such an epiphany is not initially afforded the disciples. They want to believe what Mary tells them, but it is more than they can grasp. They vaguely remember Jesus' teaching that a grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die before it bears fruit, but they don't understand how this teaching applies to their master's life. They also don't understand how it applies to their life.

Following Mary's experience of the risen Lord, Jesus appears to the disciples in the Upper Room. He walks with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. A week later he reappears to the disciples and to Thomas. He has breakfast with seven of them by the side of the Sea of Tiberius. In these appearances, the disciples see, hear, and perhaps even touch the hands and the wounded side of their risen Lord.

We would expect that these experiences of the risen Christ would galvanize the disciples into action. We would expect them to be fired with enthusiasm for the mission that had been entrusted to them. This is not the case! The disciples remain mired in their wilderness experience, grieving the loss of the one they loved and served. Even though they know they should move forward, they remain stuck in the past. They remain stuck in their pain and loss. They remain stuck in their memories of what they had and their realization of what they no longer have.

Have you ever had the kind of experience that the disciples had following their Lord's crucifixion? Have you ever lost someone special, someone around whom you had built your life and your hopes for the future? It may have happened through death. It may have happened through divorce. It may have happened through a disease like Alzheimer's or dementia, which claimed your loved one even while he/she was still with you. If this has happened to you, you know how difficult it is to reengage, to regain an enthusiasm for life.

Even though the disciples know that life goes on, that their lives are meant to go forward, they are lost and confused. When they walked with their Lord, they went where he went. Now that he is no longer with them, they don't know where to go. They know they need to do something, but they don't know what it is they are supposed to do.

I think we have all had that experience. We know that the past is past. We cannot change the past and we cannot bring it back. All we can live is the present. As we live the present, we help to create the future. But when we are in a wilderness experience, especially when we are confused and in the throes of depression, it is difficult to see the path that we must tread.

The response of the disciples following the death of their Lord illustrates a human tendency. Having experienced the loss of the centering principle in their lives, having lost a sense of meaning in their life, and having lost a sense of a meaningful future, the disciples decide to go backwards. They revert to their old ways. They return to where they were before they became involved with this man and his mission.

Seven of the disciples gather by the Sea of Tiberias. They talk with each other about what happened, trying to understand. They try to piece their shattered lives back together. Finally, Simon Peter ends the discussion by saying, very simply, "I am going fishing." The rest of the disciples say, "We will go with you." They all climb into the boat.

Before he became a disciple of the Way, Peter was a fisherman. Peter is trying to rebuild his life by going backwards. Fishing is something he knows. In the back of his mind, Peter hears Jesus' voice telling him that he is called to be a fisher of souls. He hears a voice that rings in his memory, but he no longer understands its message. He decides to go back to his old ways and pretend nothing has happened. He says, very simply, "I am going fishing."

Though the seven disciples fish all night, they catch nothing. As dawn breaks upon the lake, their boat is empty. There is a lesson here for us. When we try to go backwards in life, we become psychologically and spiritually impoverished. When we are unable to connect with the present, we lose touch with that which will feed us. Despite all our efforts, our little boat will end up empty.

Just after daybreak, Jesus appears on the beach. Because he appears in a different form, the disciples initially do not recognize him. Jesus gently offers some unsolicited advice. He tells them they have been fishing off the wrong side of the boat. When the disciples follow his suggestion to cast their nets on the other side, they are unable to haul it in because there are so many fish.

There is a lesson in this for us. Without Jesus the disciples catch nothing. With Jesus they catch more than they could imagine! They experience abundance! As they begin to realize what is happening, the disciples remember the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, how the Lord was able to feed so many with so little, and how there was food left over after the meal.

We know that we can never be separated from the love of God that is shown to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. We know that the Holy Spirit is always with us as our comforter, teacher, and guide. We can, however, be separated from the consciousness of God. When we are not conscious of God's presence in our lives, we live as if we were alone. When we do not open our eyes to the light, we dwell in darkness.

Jesus invites the disciples to breakfast. Just as when he fed the five thousand, he takes bread, blesses it, and gives it to them. He does the same with the fish. Just as he did with the disciples in the Upper Room and the two disciples in Emmaus, he breaks bread with the disciples by the lake. When he does this, their eyes are opened. The disciples realize that they are in the presence of their Lord!

Jesus then asks Peter if he loves him. The first time he asks, Peter is dismayed. He knows he loves Jesus, but he realizes he has not been living his life as one who loves his Lord. He realizes that this love should have given rise to a changed, a transformed life. He realizes that this love should bear fruit.

The second and the third time Jesus asks the question, Peter is plunged into guilt. He suddenly realizes why Jesus asks him three times. He remembers Jesus' prediction at the Last Supper that before dawn Peter will deny him three times. Three times that night Peter was asked if he was a follower of Jesus. Three times Peter denied it. When he hears the crowing of the rooster that heralds the dawn, Peter goes off by himself and weeps bitterly.

Peter realizes that Jesus not only knows the weakness he displayed that fateful night; Jesus also knows his strength. Jesus knows his potential, the potential that will unfold once Peter returns to his true Center, to the presence of his risen Lord within him. In that moment, in that encounter on the beach, Peter rediscovers himself. He rediscovers his mission, a mission that becomes the meaning of his life. He remembers that he is to become a fisher of human souls. He is to feed Jesus' sheep. He is called to build up the church.

The disciples were transformed by their encounters with Jesus when he was with them in human form. They experience a further transformation through the rediscovery of him as the risen Christ. They then realize that the experience of transformation is not an end in itself. Jesus' message is meant for them, but it is not meant solely for them. Jesus not only wants to live in them; he also wants to live through them to bring about change in the world.

Like Peter and the disciples, we need to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to the presence of our risen Lord. He is with us and within us, leading us forth into new life, keeping us from slipping back into the old ways, into the old and destructive patterns that enslave us. Like Peter and the disciples, we need to remember that this new life to which Jesus calls us is a life that is not to be lived for ourselves; it is life that is to be lived for others.

As we emerge from our wilderness experiences, whatever they are, and find ourselves reattaching to the outer world in a new way, we need to remember the charge that Jesus gave to Peter. Jesus wants us, like Peter, to reach out in compassion and love to those around us. Jesus wants us, like Peter, to build up the church, the body of Christ. Jesus wants us to make the kingdom of God a living reality throughout the earth. Like the disciples at the Last Supper, he reminds us that just as he serves us, so also, we should serve each other.

Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. On another occasion he fed four thousand people with seven loaves and a few small fish. In both instances, there was food left over. As we travel through a wilderness experience, we discover that Jesus has provided us with manna from heaven, our daily bread, the bread that nourishes the body, and the bread that nourishes the soul. When we have received and partaken of the bread of life, we will discover that there is bread left over. Like Peter, we are called to share this bread with others.

Jesus calls his disciples forth into life. He meets them in the wilderness that they experience following his death. He reminds them that, no matter how tempting it might be at times, they cannot return to the old ways. They must move forward into life!

What Jesus said to Peter on the beach that morning, by the side of the Sea of Tiberius, he also says to us. If we love our Lord, if we are grateful for his healing presence during the painful moments of our lives, that love will lead us forth to feed his sheep.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio version of this sermon will be available later this week on our church website.