

In the Beginning

Cycle #3 – Session # 2

In the Beginning

Text: John 21:1-17

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle. John regularly uses the imagery of light as the symbol of God's presence among us. He also reminds us often that it is God light which shines in us and is made visible by our lives. As we light this candle may it remind us of who God is and who we are to be.

Song: When God Is A Child -- #132 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

(read antiphonally) *adapted from scripture*

People of God, offer praise to the Eternal One

Holy is God's name now and forever more.

From the rising of the sun to its setting

Praise the name of the Eternal, Our God.

God comes to us in times of need

and sustains us in times of sorrow.

Blessed are those who come in your name

and care for all your children in every place.

**Let us sing praises to God and offer words of praise
each morning**

Let us come to the end of the day with thanksgiving

And remember we are loved with a very great love.

Bless the Lord, O my soul'

and all that is within bless God's Holy Name.

Blessed be Your name forever

May your glory fill the whole earth.

And your presence be made visible in each of us.

Welcome One Another. The hymn has four themes which seem to fit with the Gospel of John, *hope, peace, joy, and love*. It ends with the phrase, *the weak shall be strong and none shall be afraid*. Pick one of the words or perhaps the last phrase. Where do you see the presence of these qualities in your own life or being lived by others? Share briefly with one another.

Cycle #3 – Session #2

Scripture

John 21:1-17

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, ^{*}Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, '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.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him; 'No.' ⁶He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' ¹⁶A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' ¹⁷He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

As I was preparing to write the first of these sessions, I received these wise words from a fortune cookie. "Things should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." I have written with that in mind, but when it comes to John's gospel, it is difficult to find any simplicity, unless you're willing to stay in very shallow water. That, however, seems to be a very unsatisfactory way to approach this complicated book. It has much to offer, but that will require going further and discovering some of the hidden depths. The scripture for this session is one of those passages that may both challenge and encourage, puzzle and clarify and all at the same time.

There are a few things to keep in mind which may help us.

- 1) God's incarnation made visible in Jesus is key to understanding this gospel.
- 2) Chronology doesn't seem to be a primary concern for the writer of John. Since John apparently had and used other sources, the timeline is very different. For example Jesus spends much more time in Jerusalem and near there than he does in any other gospel. He is in Jerusalem for three Passovers, not just one.
- 3) As part of this lack of concern for chronology, it is sometimes difficult to know whether some events are pre or post Easter.
- 4) The whole gospel is being told in the post Easter light so that events are seen as being filled with God's living presence.
- 5) The writer understood his writing as being guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- 6) As in all the gospels there is probably a mixture of historical accounts as well as sayings which have come down from others and have been written from a post Easter understanding of God.
- 7) One of the keys to understand is that God's love and that love which was expressed in the person of Jesus is entrusted to those who follow him. They are to let others know about this great love.
- 8) The gospel didn't start out in its final form. It apparently went through several editing processes before it came to the form upon which our present translations are based.

That brings us to the story for this session. The first puzzler is its location. If you read the last two verses of John 20, it sounds like that is the end of the story. "*Now Jesus*

did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” The most fitting words to follow that would seem to be, *The End*.

Recently I read a fascinating 19th century English novel, ***Wives and Daughters***, by Elizabeth Gaskell. The writer did a fantastic job of creating the characters and weaving multiple stories through the pages. Since it was first published as a serial, each section had to move the story along, connect to everything before it, provide a connection to what would follow and leave the reader asking, “And then what?” Just before the final chapter, the writer died, apparently with pen in hand. This left readers, even one in the 21st century, saying...but? So her editor took her notes and while he made no effort to write in her style, he wrote an epilogue to missing bits. That’s how Craddock and Bohring in ***The People’s Commentary**** suggest looking at this final chapter. It ties up some of the loose ends and brings together some of the themes which have run through the Gospel and brings it into the ecumenical perspective which flows through the book. The rest of the Gospel is to be read in the light of this final chapter.

*(From this point on, in all of the rest of the sessions, you will see references to ***The People’s Commentary*** by Fred Craddock and Eugene Bohring. I was in need of more help than I was finding among the books on my shelves and I know that other things I have learned from these two people have been invaluable. If you would like to explore biblical text further and at the same time find a commentary that is readable and will provide “light” to your studies, I would recommend this one. It is published by Westminster John Knox Press, ISBN 0-664-22754-6.)

While we are only going to look at John 21:1- 17 there is a little more if you read to the end of the chapter. These things may help us grasp the transformation which was going on among the Disciples in the time after the resurrection and point us toward the ongoing transformation which has to continue among all who have followed. Remember the amphitheater? This scene includes the central actors, but it brings all of us, row by row, century after century, into the ongoing story. What was in the past, also takes place in the present. By the time we come to the end of chapter 21, three things have become visible.

- 1) The rivalry between Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciples seems to have been resolved.
- 2) The hope of Jesus’ return thus bringing the future to an expected culmination is made clear.
- 3) The post resurrection appearances of Jesus in Galilee found in the first three Gospels are balanced with his appearances in Judea.

The timing of this event is somewhat problematic and is one of those things which leave the readers puzzled. While it is a post resurrection appearance, it has the ring of perhaps having taken place before the crucifixion or immediately thereafter. In John 21:19-23, there is an account of Peter’s not only having received the Holy Spirit directly from the risen Christ, but of being made a powerful leader. *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them: if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* That being the case, why would he choose to go back to his former life at this time? This is one of

those places where it is probably wise to put aside your perspective of *Clock Time* and realize that in John's understanding this story takes place in *God's Time*, as does the entire gospel. Once again we are talking about Jesus entering into the world. The chronology of the event is much less important than the message.

Observation

Through the various gospels the list of the Disciples' "who's who" seems to vary. At times there are twelve listed, but they aren't always the same in each gospel. In this story there are only eight, the sons of Zebedee, who we know means James and John, and two who are listed only in John's gospel, Nathanael and Joseph of Arimathea. There are two others plus the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter for a total of eight. Except for key players who show up in all the gospels, the number 12 may have been chosen because of the 12 tribes of Israel and the actual list was much more fluid. It was only later that the church wanted to pin down the definitive list. One thing that does seem very clear in all the Gospels is that Simon Peter emerges as the leader. If he says he's going fishing, others will go with him. And after all the recent tumultuous events, going fishing may have sounded like a good idea. Fisher friends tell me, it's a great way to relax. The point of the story is further on.

Consider

The people who appear in this story for the most part aren't the ones who are well known, but perhaps this serves as a reminder the actual circle is larger than the twelve and that there is room for more rather than fewer in the story. If there is room for them, is there not also room for us? Consider all the people who have encountered Jesus one way and another. Most of them are unknown or perhaps only mentioned in passing.

Observation

There seems to be an assumption on the part of the writer of John that in fact the first disciples had been fishermen since he hasn't mentioned this anywhere else in the gospel. But now we begin to move to the heart of the encounter. They go fishing and are out all night and catch nothing. That is a lot of work to get nothing. As dawn is coming and it is pretty clear they are going back empty handed John reminds us of events at the last supper. As the disciples were gathered at the table with Jesus on that night he had said, "You can do nothing apart from me." (John 15:5) In that same passage Jesus had said to his disciples. "*As the father has loved me, so I have loved you.*"

Consider

One of the things about the disciples in John is they were sometimes a little 'thick' and didn't really catch on to things as quickly as they might have. But then maybe we aren't entirely unlike them. We can hear something over and over, but until it is made real, it

may not connect. How do you learn? How have you learned about God's love? Who has lived that in your life? Who may see that love in you?

Observation

Except for a few occasions such as Jesus' coming to the Disciples huddled in fear in a locked room, many of the post resurrection stories seem to indicate that Jesus was not immediately recognized by his followers. This story is much the same. We first see Jesus standing on the shore. Even when he asks the question, "*Have you caught any fish?*" they still don't know who he is. In spite of not having recognized him, they do as he says and throw the net on the other side of the boat. On that side, there are plenty of fish and their nets are full to the point they should have been breaking. One of the little details mentioned is that there are 153 fish. At one time that number may have actually had a mystical meaning. The only hint that it may have been significant is its being a "special triangular number" which can be divided by 3, but which you can get to by adding numbers in a series from 1-17. (*The People's Commentary*, p. 360). However, any meaning other than representing an incredibly large catch has long since been lost. That kind of detail, however, is one of the things which make John's stories so amazingly real.

Consider

The disciples, turned temporarily fishermen, responded to the instructions even though they didn't recognize Jesus as the one giving them. If you had been in their place what would you have done? Would you have thought perhaps he could see something you couldn't and so cast the nets on the other side even though you were exhausted and the cause must have seemed hopeless? Would you have ignored the voice and continued toward the shore? Does God sometimes come to us in persons we don't recognize? And how do you respond? If something in your life or in your congregation isn't going well, how open are you to hearing the suggestion to do something differently?

Observation

It is finally the "disciple whom Jesus loved" who recognizes Jesus. Once he has said, "it is the Lord," it is Peter who puts on his clothes (for he was naked) and jumps into the water. The others are busy dragging the fish the short distance to the land, but Peter is so anxious to see Jesus he has plunged in and gone on ahead. Jesus calls to them to bring some of the fish they've just caught and to come have breakfast. Now that Jesus has invited them to come and eat, all of them have recognized him for who he is.

Consider

Who are the people you've encountered who most often recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in events first? Who are the people who like Peter rush ahead? Who are the

people who continue to do the work they are doing, but who also recognize the Spirit is among them?

Observation

John says this is the first time Jesus has appeared to them, but that only works if one doesn't count Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus when she went to the tomb. This may be a hint of several things. One, it may be that Mary wasn't believed until others had the experience of meeting the risen Christ. It might have meant it was the first time this particular group had encountered the risen Christ. It may be that by the time this story was written down, women were no longer being numbered among the early leaders. The change which went on in the years after the resurrection in some ways impoverished the church and yet in generation after generation, there have been remarkable women who have been leaders, who have been spiritual teachers and guides.

Consider

Are there women who have been important to your own faith journey? Who? And how?

Observation

The charcoal fire on which breakfast is cooking is a reminder of the night on which Jesus was betrayed and Peter and the others stood around a charcoal fire. In this passage those events are being reversed. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him so that Peter has the opportunity to acknowledge Jesus and mend the brokenness represented in the three denials. There doesn't seem to be any particular significance to the question being asked in different ways each time, although Peter may have been feeling a little exasperated by the time he hears the question a third time. The phrase "more than these" might refer to Peter's old way of life or it may have been as it is often interpreted, "*Do you love me more than these other disciples?*" Either way the relationship which had been broken, at least on Peter's side, is healed with the gift of love and forgiveness in this scene. Along with three questions are three commands, "*Be the Shepherd of my flock.*"

Consider

While this scene is a witness to the emerging leadership of Peter as the "shepherd" of the church, it may also point to something more for us. If you were in his place and were asked the question, "*Do you love me?*" and along with that "*Do you love God more than other things in your life?*" What would your answer be? Along with that question then goes the command "*Feed my sheep.*" Not everyone is called to be a pastor, but we are all called to care for one another. Who are people to whom you might be able to reach out in love? Who are the ones for whom you care? Are you willing to care for others?

Activity (Optional)

This may be a good occasion to share bread and cup with each other as a part of the worship. In doing that, you might also remember times you have gathered with others and recognized God in your midst.

If you have time and want to do something enjoyable as a group, the film, *Babette's Feast*, is a delightful recounting of a community of Christians who have become estranged from one another. It is in sharing a meal, especially prepared by Babette, the community is restored. If you do not have time for another occasion, you might use the scene of the meal as an activity before sharing bread and cup with each other.

Practicing the Presence

As you begin this second week of cycle three, you may want to spend some time reflecting on the meaning of the scripture from John and the new creation and how that connects to the birth of the church. Continue to use the pattern of reading you have used for other sessions. At this point you may be thinking, *Been there done that... not once but twice*. And you have. I had thought before I started putting the sessions together, I would suggest a different prayer practice for each week. Then as I thought about how change occurs in our lives and how we deepen or expand our relationship with God, I decided to suggest the same basic practice and trust that each person will adapt it to their own needs and interests. No two of us will pray in exactly the same way, but the practice of praying with scripture offers guidance and encourages us to move away from seeing prayer as a time we come and tell God what we want. Listening to God is at least as important as God's listening to us. Even when I come to a text which I have read many times, I find that sometimes something fresh emerges, even when I wasn't looking for it. What I have heard in talking with many others is that they have also had this experience.

The focus this week is on transformation and how those who will carry the good news out into the world encounter the risen Christ.

Another of the prayers I carry from the book of Celtic Prayer I included last week is this one which seems perhaps well suited to a week when you aren't where you've been and you're not where you're going, but like the first disciples you are somewhere in between.

Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words,
But I do not feel or think them.
Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words,
Thinking about what I say, but not feeling.
Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words
And I both think and feel what I say.
An act of will cannot make me feel,

Nor stop my mind from wandering.
An act of will can only make me utter,
So I shall utter the words,
And let the Spirit do the rest,
guiding my mind and heart he wills.

p. 18 Celtic Prayer

The focus for the next session is Acts 2:1-18

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you -

This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it's out in the open. God wanted everyone, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple.

Colossians 1:26-29

Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house.

Give it plenty of room in your lives.

Instruct and direct one another using good common sense.

And sing; sing your hearts out to God!

Let every detail in your lives

words, actions, whatever, be done in the name of the Master, Jesus,
thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Colossians 3:15-17
The Message Bible

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another. *If you choose to share bread and cup in this service, do so now. Include in your prayers, thanksgiving for Jesus who is bread of life and cup of grace.*

Response

Be gentle, when you touch bread.
Let it not lie, uncared for, unwanted.
So often bread is taken for granted.
There is such beauty in bread –
Beauty of sun and soil,
Beauty of patient toil.
Wind and rain have caressed it,
Christ often blessed it.
Be gentle when you touch it.

Anonymous

**Source of all we turn to you.
Savior of all we turn to you.
Sustainer of all we turn to you.**

Blessing

**And now may the light of God surround us,
The love of God enfold us,
The power of God protect us,
The presence of God watch over us
everyday of our lives, now and forever.
Amen**

Song: *Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*