

“John: Fishing Right”

John 21:1-14 • Isaiah 55:1-9

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We’ve reached the last chapter of John and if you’re thinking it kind of seems like an afterthought you’re not alone. In fact many scholars have noted that John 21 seems like it was just added on to the end. The end of chapter 20, when Thomas sees Jesus and declares, “My Lord and my God,” is the climax of John’s narrative about Jesus. That’s what he’s been trying to get us to see all along. The whole point of John’s gospel is for *you* to see Jesus for who he is and for you to also declare “*my* Lord and *my* God!”

So to understand what John is doing in chapter 21, we have to go back to chapter 1. The beginning of John is really a prologue to the whole book. John begins by summarizing the activity of the Lord before the incarnation. He writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through him...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” It’s also in chapter 1 that we are introduced to Simon Peter, Andrew, Phillip, and Nathanael.

If chapter 1 is the prologue, chapter 21 is the epilogue, which is like a conclusion to wrap up and summarize the book. The prologue dealt with the preincarnate Christ, the epilogue now deals with the post-resurrection Christ and an encounter he had with his disciples. But this is not just a story about them seeing Jesus again. This entire encounter is a picture of Christ and his church. Jesus is preparing them to go carry on his mission.

The first thing we want to notice is that John says the disciples were together. Usually when one of these messianic-type leaders was crucified, all the followers scattered. It was over. But we find Jesus’ disciples still meeting together. They met together in Jerusalem when Jesus came to visit them twice, and they are together now in Galilee. This is one of the primary marks of the church, that we are together – not just for an hour on Sunday but we are doing life together. This is why I think

our Wednesday night dinners are so important. It’s a chance for us to be together as a family.

Some of the disciples had gone home to Galilee. I’m sure they had gone to see family. But they also went because Jesus commanded them to go. In Matthew 28, after his resurrection, the angel and then Jesus himself tell the women at the tomb to go tell the other disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. So they went and waited for him. But Peter never was one to sit still. He was all action. He says, “I’m going fishing,” and the others say they’ll go with him. Remember that several of them had been fishermen when Jesus called them and promised to make them “fishers of men.”

Many of you I know enjoy fishing. It can be a great way to relax. That’s not the kind of fishing that these men were doing. They were commercial fishermen. This was their area of expertise, the thing they knew how to do well. They were going back to what was familiar to relieve some of the anxiety about Jesus and about their future. Most of us do the same thing. When life seems to be spinning out of control we try to cling to our areas of expertise, where we can feel competent. When you and I do that we end up trying to rely on our own strength and skill and not on God!

Remember that I said this story is a picture of the church. Look at who is mentioned in the fishing boat. There’s Peter, who had three times denied even knowing Jesus. Thomas refused to believe that Jesus was alive unless he saw and touched him. Nathanael was the one back in chapter 1 who said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And the Sons of Zebedee, James and John, argued about who was the greatest and actually asked Jesus to give them the places of honor in heaven. The point is that the church of Jesus Christ is made up of flawed, broken, sinful people who are chosen by God anyway.

The disciples worked all night. It was hard work – casting the net, pulling it back in,

nothing. Empty. They did it over and over and over. Verse 3 says, “that night they caught nothing.” At this point they must have been thinking, “We used to be really good at this. What has happened to us?”

As the church we can work really hard, doing over and over the things we used to be good at. But if we are doing it without Jesus we will come up empty every time and get exhausted in the process. Jesus said, “apart from me you can do nothing.” We can’t accomplish his mission of fishing for people without him.

Just as day was breaking, before the sun was up when there was that first light, when the darkness is just starting to lift, they see someone standing on the shore. They don’t know it’s Jesus. Once Jesus is out of the tomb there’s no telling when and where he will show up in our lives, often when we least expect him and often when things seem their worst. They were not seeking Jesus but He was seeking them, and us.

James Montgomery Boice points out that at this point Jesus does three things. “First, *he asks a question*. The point of the question is to reveal to the disciples their own need and failure.” Jesus shouts to them, “hey kids, do you have any fish?” Of course since He is God he already knows the answer. For the disciples, though, this kind of stings a little. They have to admit their failure. They simply answer, “no.”

Second, “the Lord next *gives a command*.” Jesus says, “throw the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” Commentators and preachers who want to deny anything supernatural about Jesus have often tried to claim that from the shore Jesus could see a school of fish that the men in the boat couldn’t. That would be an even bigger miracle for someone to be able to see a school of fish in the water, in the dark, a hundred yards away, while the men in the boat couldn’t see them.

To these professional fishermen, Jesus’ instruction could have seemed like he was taunting them. They were fishing by lowering a net beneath the boat and then pulling it back up. If there are no fish on the left, there are none on

the right. But they do it anyway. Maybe they think, what can it hurt. Or maybe they remember the last time that they had fished all night and caught nothing. In Luke 5 Jesus had used their boat to preach to the crowd while Peter, Andrew, James, and John washed their nets. When the sermon was over Jesus told Peter to put out into deeper water and let down his net again and this time the net had so many fish that it was breaking. When Simon Peter saw all those fish he fell down before Jesus and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”

Boice says, “The point is not *where* the work is to be done or *how*. It is whether it is being done under Christ’s direction and in obedience to him or by our own wisdom and initiative.” In the gospels, fishing refers to evangelism, telling people about Jesus. God is very clear in His word that we are all to be involved in helping people to meet, love, and follow Jesus in every area of their lives. That means that we have to be willing to confess where we have tried to do the work in our own way. We need to confess when we have not even tried to carry out the Great Commission of making disciples. We have all put other things in our lives ahead of Christ and His Church. That means that each one of us needs to stop and listen to what God is telling us, and go where He is leading us to carry out His mission. Most of all it means that we must go to Jesus for His direction.

That brings us to the third thing Jesus does, he “*sends blessings*.” Boice says, “Now in response to their obedience to his command, Jesus sends such a great catch of fish that they are unable to draw the catch to land.” It’s in the blessing that comes from obedience that John recognizes Jesus and says, “It is the Lord!” It’s the same for us. When we obey Jesus’ command to love God and people and to make disciples, he will bless us. He will fill the church with people. And when that happens we, too, will say, “It is the Lord!”

Amen.