

Who Are We Now?

Psalm 30

John 21: 1-19

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Psalm 30

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

John 21: 1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon 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. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He 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. That 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 sea. But 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. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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." A 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." He 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. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

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What do we do now? Who are we now?

We can easily imagine these being the questions that the disciples asked themselves after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Fearfully hidden in a locked home they are unsure of just what to do, who to trust. Twice they have seen Jesus appear since his predicted yet astounding resurrection as he greeted them with the tender, reassuring words, “Peace be with you,” showed his wounded side, hands and feet, and commissioned them, sending them out by the breath of the Holy Spirit to offer forgiveness as their ministry.

They have a mission, yet they are confused and stumped. Hiding in fear of those who had killed Jesus, the disciples are disillusioned, and their idealism has been battered by painful realities. Denial and betrayal came from within their own close-knit circle, and only one of them—John—remained loyal enough to bear witness to the crucifixion.

It was Peter—always the first to speak and act whether or not it was a wise decision—who decides to leave the insecure safety of their room for a late-night fishing trip. They have been called and commissioned by Jesus to go out, to carry on the work he had begun with them, yet they just cannot take that step yet. Perhaps they are afraid of stepping out into this community who will recognize them as Jesus’ disciples, or they are fearful of failing again at what Jesus expected of them, or they doubt they have the faith and fortitude to go out to minister in Jesus’ name and with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, but Peter decides to turn back to the life they once knew and invites others to join him. Seven of the eleven disciples return to the world and work they knew just three years earlier---fishing. This is a place of confidence and experience and control. The work is hard, and some nights better than others, but it is known and comfortable and familiar. They choose to ignore-or at least put on hold-the greater mission that was given to them by Jesus. The world has changed but they want to go back to the way things were. They are not ready for a new normal.

We are not hiding in a locked room and choosing to go fishing instead of going out to forgive people in Jesus’ name by the breath of the Holy Spirit, but like the disciples we know what it is to live in a world that has changed in the past few years. We know what it is like needing to be ready for a new normal even though we are unsure of just it will be, what it will mean for us, and what it will require.

Just over two years ago the world we all knew came to an abrupt, startling, life-changing and instant halt because of Covid-19. A microscopic virus locked us down as it killed millions worldwide, sickened millions more, impacted the mental health of many, brought to brighter light the wide inequalities of first and third worlds, racism and economic injustices and it also set off unprecedented political divisions. Everything that could possibly close did close, our definition of first responders grew to include grocery store clerks, postal employees and Amazon delivery drivers, and toilet paper became a hot commodity. We saw each other in pixels, we all worshipped from our homes on screens and were masked when we needed to go out. Life passages and milestones became delayed or honored in a drive-by parade. Playground equipment

grew dusty, professional teams played without fans and camping became the perfect vacation escape.

As so many people worked from home and traffic became minimal, air and water pollution were decreased as were greenhouse gases and resource consumption, more wildlife was seen, crime rates were down, and technology was used for worship, to teach and to bring people together to visit, we saw these silver linings in the dark pandemic cloud as the first steps to our new normal. We quickly recognized how many things we could never take for granted any more: seeing someone face to complete face, going out to a restaurant or to hear live music or to a museum, gathering to mourn a loved one, gathering to celebrate special occasions, going to church or to school in person, walking into the library to choose a book or taking a plane for a long-awaited trip. We wondered what do we do now? Who are we now?

We could not know for sure what the other side of the pandemic would look like, but we began to get a sense and glimpses of our new normal. Within the first few months we knew that we could not go back to the way things had been—we could not return to fishing when we were being called to a different future than any of us had imagined as we welcomed in New Year's Day 2020.

Peter and six others went out on the Sea of Tiberias for an old normal night of fishing, to reclaim the life they once knew, a life where they were in control, danger was minimal, and the only expectations were really their own. Yet their return was a failure as they did not catch a single fish all night long. They wanted their old life, their familiar old normal, but it was gone.

Our old lives, our familiar old normal is gone as well. We have seen, heard and learned too much in the past two years—for good and for bad—and the pandemic is still not yet an endemic—to do anything but move onto what the new normal will be.

For Peter and the other fishermen disciples, frustration and confusion must have set in as they don't know the way forward and they see that they can't go back. It takes Jesus on the shore giving them another miraculous catch for them to see that he is their way forward, that their new normal is to carry on his ministry in his name. The plans and the details are not yet known, but their new normal is beginning to take shape as they follow Jesus.

We too do not yet know the way forward. Some of us are frustrated and confused, some are anxious, some are patient, and chances are at some point we will move through all of these feelings, and certainly more. We find lament in the illness and deaths because of Covid, in the grief and loss of so many of our plans, hopes and expectations, and we find joy in the healing of so many, in the care and presence of all the first responders, and in the freedoms regained by the vaccines. We move back and forth just as the psalmist did.... 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.'

UCC pastor Richard Floyd* says the psalm mirrors the rhythm of faith as we rock back and forth between lament and thanksgiving. We face times of testing, times of profound challenges, times of weeping for what has been lost, but also times of rejoicing for what has been restored, for what has been found, for what has been given to us by sheer grace.

We are rocking back and forth between lament and thanksgiving, between anticipation and frustration, in this liminal time of not yet a new normal, yet unable to go back to where we were and who we were.

Who are we now? The answer is still incomplete, just as it was for the disciples as they waited for the Holy Spirit. The almost-again-fishermen needed to recover and reclaim the habits of following Jesus that they had done for three years—meeting people beyond their familiar

comfort zone and learning what they needed, being in prayer, and being together to experience God stepping into the ordinary and then seeing the impact of God's grace in the lives of people who encounter acts of love and kindness. It was a time of discipleship and discovery for them, and it is for us too. Amen.

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