

John 21 “Feed My Sheep”
Ezekiel 47
Psalm 46

November 29, 2020

A couple weeks ago we read Ezekiel 37
and we saw the connection between the Valley of Dry Bones
and the resurrection of Jesus.

In Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones –
God promises that he will breathe life into those dry bones – and they will live.
The dry bones are the house of Israel – the people of God.

Then last week, we saw Jesus in John 20 breathing on his disciples –
which should remind us of the breath of life being breathed into those dry bones.

Here in chapter 47, we hear a part of Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple –
a temple that does not really fit into the earthly dimensions of Jerusalem.
And particularly, here we see a trickle of water flowing from the temple
that grows deeper and deeper as it flows from temple eastward.

And wherever this river goes it brings life –
even to the Dead Sea!

There are no fish in the Dead Sea –
but when the river of living water flows there –
even the Dead Sea will come alive!

And the fishermen will spread their nets and catch many fish.
And not only that – but alongside the river of living water,
there will be trees whose leaves will not wither –
and whose fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

John’s gospel uses lots of images and patterns from Ezekiel.
This picture of the river of life is one of them.
In John 7, Jesus had said that from his heart
rivers of living water would flow to his people.
(And in John 19, when they pierce Jesus side,
we are told that blood *and water* flowed from the heart of Jesus).
The river of living water has begun to flow from the temple!

Because Jesus *is* the temple – he is the place where earth and heaven meet! –
we heard about that back in John, chapter 2!

Our Psalm of response comes from Psalm 46 –

a song that speaks of the river that makes glad the city of God!

Oh, and by the way, what city is that?

Jerusalem, right?

Well, what river flows through Jerusalem?

There is none.

(Hezekiah had to dig a tunnel straight through solid rock
in order to get water into the city!)

What is the *river* that makes glad the city of God?

Psalm 46 is speaking of the *same river* as Ezekiel 47.

The city of God needs the river of life to flow from the heart of Jesus!

Sing Psalm 46

Read John 21

Way back at the beginning of our series on John's gospel –

I asked “What kind of soil are you?”

Jesus tells us that the seed fell on many kinds of soil.

Some fell on the path and was eaten by birds

(those who hear the word but it has no effect).

Some fell on rocky soil

(those who receive the word with joy, but it takes no root).

Some fell among the thorns

(those who hear the word, and it grows—it does take root—

but it is choked by the cares of the world and it never bears fruit).

And some fell on the good soil

(those who hear, understand, and bear fruit).

What kind of soil are you?

John's gospel was written

so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Have you come, with Thomas, to see that this Jesus is indeed your Lord and your God?

Because John tells us in John 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,
glory of the as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Now, in the resurrection, the apostles beheld his glory.

The prologue, in John 1:1-18 points us back to the past – in the beginning.

The epilogue, here in John 21 points us to future.

John concludes with a hint of what is to come.

And he does so with the assistance of two images: fish and sheep.

We sometimes pit these images against each other.

I heard it said that some pastors are fishermen –

they like to plant churches, do evangelism—to cast their nets out into the sea,
and bring people in.

Others are shepherds.

They like to feed the sheep—to care for the flock.

But the tendency to divide the two images is contrary to the picture of John 21.

Fishing and shepherding are not two different activities, but one.

They are two different images that refer to the same thing.

We get in trouble when we think of fishing as referring to a person's initial salvation
and shepherding as referring to their subsequent growth in grace.

But scripture does not portray these activities in that way.

Think about the image of the good Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep.

Feed my sheep does not mean, feed those who are already in the church.

Christ calls me to feed all of his sheep—
even those who don't yet realize that they are sheep!

Likewise fishing does not mean, go out and bring new people into the church.

It's not enough to get the fish into the net,
you have to get the fish to the shore!

153 fish in a net is quite a catch,
but it's worth nothing if the net breaks and all the fish swim away.

Jesus uses the image of the fishing net as an image of the kingdom of God

Matthew 13:47-50

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea
and gathered fish of every kind.

When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down
and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.

So it will be at the close of the age.

The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous
and throw them into the fiery furnace.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This image of the fisherman suggests that to be a “fisher of men”
includes all of the same duties as “feeding the sheep.”

It is not just about getting people “saved” in the short run.

Fishing is a kingdom activity—it is about bringing the fish to the shore--
in Jesus' terms, in bringing people to the final judgment.

But the other implication of this image of the fisherman
is that we should have a pretty big net!
The kingdom of heaven, as it exists on earth, is filled with all sorts of fish.
Nowadays we have “designer” churches,
each with their own custom-built nets,
designed to catch a certain sort of person.
Perhaps there is no way to avoid that entirely in an age of specialization,
but we should resist the temptation to be a “niche” church.
The church should be a place where all who are weary and heavy laden can find rest.
Because the church is where people find Jesus.

So let’s take a look – first at what it means to go fishing!

1. “It Is the Lord”: How to Catch Fish (v1-14)

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ 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.

Peter and six other disciples are together in Galilee.

What are they doing in Galilee?

Well, in Mark 16:7, Jesus told his disciples to go to Galilee and wait for him there.

Why do they go fishing?

Some have said that this shows a lack of faith.

But just because they are waiting for Jesus,
doesn’t mean that should sit around and twiddle their thumbs!

Yes, they are called to bring the gospel to the nations –
but they haven’t been clothed yet with power from on high –
(and even *afterwards* they will still need to eat!).

No one ever blames Paul for engaging in his tentmaking –
since he worked with his own hands in order to further the ministry of the gospel!

In the same way, Peter and the six other disciples who were with him
needed to make a living –
and so they went fishing!

Some have said that the fact that they caught nothing was a “judgment” against them –
but this is that same faulty logic that Jesus regularly condemns –

“Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”

No!

We need to stop thinking that if bad things happen, the reason is because *someone* sinned.
(Unless you are going to say that it is because Adam and Eve sinned!
The miseries of this life are common to the *whole* human race.)

No, the fact that they caught nothing was a part of God's purpose to reveal his glory!
Sometimes the reason why things go all wrong
has nothing to do with *you* and *your failures* –
rather, it is because God wants to show you his great power!

⁴ *Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.* ⁵ *Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No."* ⁶ *He said to them, "Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish.* ⁷ *That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.* ⁸ *The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards^[a] off.*

Jesus has just told his disciples that he is sending them
to preach the gospel (20:21)
They know that their task is to be fishers of men.
This fishing trip is to be a picture of their future ministry.
If they rely on their own efforts, then they will see no fruit.
The kingdom of God will not grow because of their great skill,
but because of the Word of Christ.
When he declares "Cast the net on the right side of the boat,"
they catch 153 fish.

Why 153 fish?
There are lots of interesting speculations –
but the one thing that we can say for certain
is that there is a connection to Ezekiel's "all kinds of fish"
in Ezekiel 47.
Ezekiel had spoken of how the fishermen by the Dead Sea would catch all kinds of fish –
like at the great sea.
Now that Jesus is raised from the dead, his disciples are going fishing.

Jesus doesn't say "this is how it will be in the future"
but that's what he's showing them.
The disciples may embark on their calling as preachers of Christ with confidence,
because their success depends upon Christ's blessing—not their own abilities.
Jesus had said in John 10,
my sheep know my voice.

The preacher can call all day long, and perhaps no one comes.
But in the end it is not our efforts that produce results.
Peter and Thomas and the others labor all night and catch nothing.
But when the voice of Christ calls,
the fish jump into *their* net.

Part of the lesson here is that they must *keep preaching*.
They must *keep fishing* –
keep trusting Jesus!

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.
¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

And then Jesus invites them to breakfast (verse 12), where he gives them bread and fish.

This echoes John 6,
where Jesus fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.
It was after that miracle that the crowds wanted to make Jesus king by force.
They declared “this is the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14)
But Jesus had told them, “I am the bread of heaven.”
For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.
Indeed, Jesus promised that “whoever comes to me shall not hunger,
and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”
“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.
And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”
And there, in John 6:44, Jesus explained that
“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”
Once again, it is the power of God that brings salvation.

Here in John 21, Jesus doesn't have to say “you will be fishers of men,”
Because it is too obvious.
They already know it.
Instead he demonstrates visibly for them that his blessing will be upon them,
by feeding them once again with fish and bread.

Jesus will provide.
Will you believe?

2. “Follow Me”: Tending and Feeding the Sheep (v15-19)

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.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved 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.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,
Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?
Peter, somewhat taken aback, replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”
Feed my lambs.
Peter, if you love me, feed my lambs—care for my little ones.

But then he said again,
Simon, son of John, do you love me?
Peter replies again, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”
Tend my sheep.
Peter, if you love me, do not abandon my flock.

And once more Jesus asks,
Simon, son of John, do you love me?
Now Peter is grieved, because he sees what Jesus is doing:
“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”
Feed my sheep.

Peter had denied Jesus three times.
Three times Peter had declared, “I do not know him.”
Now three times Jesus asks, “do you love me?”

Some commentators have tried to find distinctive meanings in each exchange.
The first two times, Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”
And the third time Peter says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”
And Jesus replies, “Feed my lambs.”
Then, “Tend my sheep”
And finally “Feed my sheep”

Peter is to be a shepherd.
And Peter remembered this.
Peter later writes in his first epistle:
“I exhort the elders among you,
as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ,
as well as a partaker in the glory to be revealed:

shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,
not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;
not for shameful gain, but eagerly;
not domineering over those in your charge,
but being examples to the flock.

And when the chief Shepherd appears,
you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Christ’s servants are shepherds – not sheep dogs!

The sheep dog runs in circles, trying to coerce the sheep to go the right way.

The shepherd walks in the way that the sheep should go.

The shepherd speaks with the voice of the Good Shepherd –
and calls the sheep to follow.

And particularly, here in John 21,

Peter is called to care for the flock—to feed the sheep—
in the face of persecution and death.

Too often verses 18-19 get separated from 15-17.

¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus is not making two different points here.

He is not saying “Peter, feed my sheep—
and oh, by the way, you are going to be killed someday.”

Rather, he is saying, “Peter, you denied me three times.

You will have a lot more opportunities.

So follow me—and like me—in the face of death, feed my sheep.”

Peter, you were afraid of the unknown.

You feared that being identified with me would result in your death.

And you were right.

It will.

If you love me, Peter, then you will feed my sheep,
you will care for my lambs,
and you will die because of it.

And John tells us that these words were spoken to show by what kind of death
Peter was to glorify God.

I like that way of saying it.

How will your death glorify God?

Martyrdom certainly glorifies God.
Those who die for the sake of Christ die well.

But John is not saying that martyrdom is the only way to glorify God in your death.
Because Peter turns to John and says, “Jesus, what about him?”
And Jesus replies—that’s none of your business!

3. “What About Him?” Why We Should Avoid Useless Questions (v20-25)

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” ²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers^[b] that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Verse 23 says that some people thought that John was never going to die.

In fact, the legend of “Prester John” grew over the centuries –
so that in the Middle Ages there were *still* rumors
that the beloved disciple had never died,
but was ruling a Christian kingdom somewhere in Asia or Africa...

But John himself points out that this is *not* what Jesus actually said.
All Jesus said was “*if* it is my will that he remain until I come,
what is that to you?”

In other words, Peter is called to preach Christ and feed his sheep,
in the face of the direct knowledge that he will die because of it.
But John is called to preach Christ and feed his sheep,
remaining entirely uncertain of what will happen.

You and I are in John’s shoes.
It may be God’s will to leave us here until he comes.
Or we may die in his service.

But we too are called to glorify God in our death.
Even you who are young–
and perhaps especially you who are young–
don’t think of yourself as indestructible!

Someday you will die.
Are you ready for that day?
If you are diagnosed with a terminal illness tomorrow,
how will you respond?

When you see one of Christ's sheep—or should we say, one of Christ's fish!--
approaching death with patience—with the comfort of the gospel,
there is no more glorious sight.

One of the great joys of the pastorate has been to accompany such saints –
Karen, Alice, Rolf, Gary, Phyllis, Myrle – and others –
on their final path to glory.

But if you are going to be suitably prepared to die,
then you need to live with the right attitude.
You need to live with a grateful heart,
thankful to God for each breath—for every heartbeat.

And that's where John ends his gospel:

²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

²⁵ Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

What kind of soil are you?

Are the cares of the world choking out the Word?
Are you parched and dry, withering in the heat of the sun?

Or is the Word taking root in you?

Do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling you?
And are you bearing fruit?