

John 21 and Ezekiel 34

April 22 2018

Chapter 21 of John is really rich, don't you find? That whole fishing on the other side of the boat and the breakfast on the shore...bread and fish, nicely bringing us back to images of the little boy who had shared his 5 loaves and 2 fish early on in the gospel....

it's rich and deep and fluid and life giving, just like the water to which they've returned after the resurrection. It's full, like that net. Full to bursting, with the 153 fish they hauled in when they thought there were none to be caught....full to bursting but ....the net holds. No matter how many fish or what kind, the net holds them all. It won't tear. The net is strong.

And I'd love to stay there and count those fish again and say to one another DID YOU SEE THAT???, but it's after breakfast now, we're full of bread and fish, now it's time to move on. We've had a glimpse of the truth that whatever else resurrection is, it's about abundance. Abundance when the world says scarcity. Abundance when in our despair or simple weakness we've gone back to the old things that once gave us comfort and no longer do....when going back to the old ways holds only emptiness and disappointment....

Abundance in casting our nets in another direction....

resurrection is about abundance and it's about belonging

and I'd love to sit by the fire and count those fish again but no....we're going to move on.

and now and here we are at the water's edge, the sun has risen a little more now, and the smell of the smoke from the campfire is still in the air, clinging to our clothes and making our eyes water if we get right in its way.....

and we get to listen in to a most intimate conversation. It's almost like voyeurism, this conversation is so...personal. So let's just be quiet and respectful and thankful for the chance to witness this moment. Here it is

read 15-19

There are at least 10 sermons falling out of this text. I just have to pick one. I'm going with the sheep. But before I do I can't NOT point out that the last time we saw a charcoal fire

was outside the palace of the high priest, before the crucifixion. Jesus was inside being interrogated and slapped around by the religious leaders. Peter had followed. What was he doing? He was outside, warming himself by a charcoal fire. And three times - three times - he denied Jesus. Well in truth, the way John writes it, he denies himself. His own identity.

"you're not one of this man's followers are you? - I am not."

and again the same question. I am not.

and a third time. He's denying his own identity. I'm not one of his followers I'm not.

So that's the last time we saw a charcoal fire. Here's another one, and another three questions. A gracious, compassionate chance for Peter to start again.

READ 15-7 AGAIN.

Isn't that beautiful? Three other questions around a charcoal fire: where Peter denied who he really was. Here, Jesus, offering back to him his own identity. You still belong. You're still a child of God. Nothing YOU can do can change that. Jesus, offering Peter the resurrection gifts of abundance and belonging; abundance of forgiveness and a new start. A way of saying "yes you messed up, and it was bad. But you're still part of the family. You still belong. Come on and have breakfast. This net? It holds everybody and nothing you do can break it. There's more than enough of Jesus' love, and more than enough fish. Come have breakfast. That's what families do.

that's simply beautiful.

Now: By the time John is writing this, it's at least 60 years after the events it describes. Peter and the others are likely long gone and a new generation of church leaders is coming into its own. And they are asking themselves - what kind of church are we going to be? How to follow Jesus in our own time and place? Who will be our leaders and what will we expect of them and to what is the spirit of the risen Jesus calling us?

Those are good questions for us too. Those are the questions that every generation ought to be asking. What kind of leadership do we want, and need,

what kind of leadership will we give

and to what is the spirit of the risen Jesus calling us in our own time and place?

Those are the questions this church is facing, and will be facing more. I'm not sure when I'm going to retire but it's certainly within the next 2-3 years. What will come after that? You need to start thinking about that now. What about when the current leaders are no longer among us? As it was in the early church, Peter and the rest had gone, and a new generation of followers was finding its way. What will happen **here** in - say - 15 years? Look around right now. Picture this place 15 years from now. Most of us won't be here....or if we are we won't be in strong leadership....who is rising to lead, what kind of leadership is called for....and to what purpose?

Very exciting questions. As it was then, so it is now and has been in every generation.

Back to the text....

So: Jesus not only reminds Peter of who he is and always has been

But he gives him a job. Feed my sheep.

I'm finally getting to the sheep part.

Sheep and shepherds - that's a standard image in Hebrew scripture. The Lord's my shepherd. Classic. Then and now. Even though most people in our society don't have a clue about shepherding or sheep we still are drawn to the image.

Here's what I think. I think that as John is writing this, as Jesus is speaking these words, in the back of their minds and probably in the front too are the words of that Psalm and also the words of a very famous passage from Ezekiel.

Quick background: Ezekiel is not using the sheep and shepherd image as a fluffy feel good, lamb cuddling metaphor. He's angry. He's really angry. At the leadership in Israel. The government, and the religious leaders, he says, are corrupt and selfish and in it for the money and that's why the country was in a mess. They are supposed to be shepherds, he says. There to care for the flock. You're supposed to be a shepherd, you leaders...so shouldn't you ...oh...here's an idea ....FEED THE SHEEP?????

It's a stinging commentary - I can picture him there in Babylon delivering this - shouting it in some sort of public forum...at a market place or wherever the people gather....the leaders who had not cared for the poor and the needy and who had put their own interests first....

he says It's not bad enough even that you butt your way to the front of the line for the best food but when you've eaten your fill you walk on what's left so others can't have it....and you push others aside to get to the fresh water and when you've had what you need you stick your muddy old feet in it so it's not good for the rest of us...

it's really good. I'm going to read his words. Brace yourself; he's mad. Picture a wild angry priest/prophet

READ WHOLE THING OR AT LEAST UNTIL 22

Feed my sheep. You haven't fed my sheep. Whose sheep are they? GOD'S sheep. What do leaders need to remember? Their job is to lead. To feed. To be leaders of the people as God leads.

VERSE 4

And so....when Jesus says to Peter feed my sheep, feed my lambs....this has to be ringing in the background, the call crackling and smoking as the campfire does what campfires do....make it a little easier to hear a call from something, someone holy. He has to be thinking Ezekiel.

Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. That's what God does. That's how God leads.

In both cases, Ezekiel and John,

how is God going to be the shepherd?

Through humans. Ezekiel has faith that a righteous leader, one like David, is coming and will do this.

Jesus himself, (whom the early Christians said - this IS the one like David, of David's line...this IS the one)

Jesus himself says to Peter and through him to us

YOU do it. That's how God works. YOU do it. You're the leaders now.