

12 July 2020 / Jn 21.4-22 - "Where Are We Now?" (Audio file sermon for Nutana Park MC)

§1 "Follow me!"

Jesus 'first words and Jesus 'last words to Peter summon him and summon us from wherever we are to move closer to him. More than that, they call us to our feet, they call us to put hand to plow, to leave our boats and tackle, to hit the road, walk the path, set our hearts forever on pilgrimage deeper into the life of God. "Follow me!"

Greetings, Nutana Park MC, in the name of our risen Savior, Jesus the Messiah, in the name of the God who holds us close and names us God's children, in the name of the Spirit who breathes life, filling our imaginations and homes with life and the future that is to come.

Greetings, from my home here in Warman, where we are increasingly living amid boxes and packing tape as we prepare for a move at the end of the month to Saskatoon. We're joining in God's work—work you're already laboring in—extending Christ's table so that no one is left out, so that all can join in finding life and giving thanks for this gift from God.

Just over a year ago, as my partner Cindy and I drove from here to the Mennonite Church Canada gathering in Abbotsford, we came face-to-face with Jesus leading us beyond our comfortable, dearly loved church-community in Warman. Jesus, as I've met him, is always watching the edges of the room, looking for those who haven't found a place at the table. He was asking us to join him in Saskatoon among students and others who have for a whole variety of reasons missed out on the taste, the feast of God's goodness given in Jesus. In the last month, picking up our lives to catch up with Jesus has become a lot more real: finding a house to live in, reimagining work and school schedules, gathering with a few coconspirators virtually to pray and listen together for the voice of Jesus calling.

Greetings also from your sisters and brothers in congregations scattered and gathered throughout Saskatchewan. In February I took on the role of MC Sask Interim Church Engagement Minister. While things have shifted dramatically during pandemic, the heart and great joy of this job is reminding our congregations that we're bound together as family in Jesus. We rejoice and weep together, work and pray and worship together. I get to remind congregations around the province—at first in-person and now virtually—of this delightful reality of our reconciliation in Jesus. Your prayers today are joined by the prayers of believers in this same Lord, this same Son of God, nearby, throughout Saskatchewan, around the world.

§2 More important than any words I can convey this morning, we meet Jesus. The story we've heard from Jn ch 21 reminds us that we may not always recognize his voice. Jesus shows up as a stranger, as a voice from across the water. Like the disciples in the boat, we don't always know him right away. Meeting Jesus, knowing Jesus requires both patience and trust.

What do we hear when we listen to this story patiently, when we open our lives to it in trust? Do you hear Jesus calling?

I am very aware that I'm listening for the Living Word to speak today from a place where, well, most of us have never been before: we're listening in the aftermath of pandemic. Jesus' voice, I suspect, sounds strange to us here. This new landscape changes its tone, its timbre. From where we sit, he doesn't look or sound quite the same.

I hear three questions he asks us in this story this morning: Where are you now? Who are you going to be? and What are you going to do?

§3 I remember where I was when I first got the news that our world was changing. I'd been at an early morning Good Breakfast hosted by the Faith Leaders Council and Peer Health at the U of S. I'd driven across the city to a Micah Mission board meeting. It was just as we sat down that cell phones began to ding or vibrate with the news that, first, the Junos were canceled, and then that MC Sask's Annual Delegate Sessions were being called off. It was in that moment that I realized that my daughter wouldn't be going back to school next week, that Cindy might not be teaching the last classes of her semester in-person, that our rhythms and routines were being fundamentally changed.

Do you remember where you were?

At first we weren't sure how long this thing would last. We grimaced at the thought maybe missing out on Good Friday services or Easter meals with family. Then Holy Week came and went. We moved the goal line to Mother's Day, Pentecost, Father's Day, Canada Day. And even as parts of society begin now to open up, we're still not sure what's safe, what's worth a risk, what life might look like in another few weeks or few months.

Where are we now?

In ch 21 takes place some time after Easter. That's where we are. The lead up to our passage, vv 1-3, narrate Simon Peter, some point after Jesus' resurrection, announcing, "I'm going fishing." Peter, along with his brother Andrew and the Zebedee brothers, fished for a living, right up to that moment when Jesus met them on the lakeshore and told them to "Come, follow me, and I'll make you fish for people." For Peter, maybe like for a few of us, fishing was life. More to the point, fishing was his normal. Now, for Peter and those who jump in the boat with him, well, it's back to normal.

I've heard folks criticize Peter and the disciples for going back to fishing. They ask, How, after Jesus has risen from the grave, walked through doors, showed them his wounded hands and side, breathed the breath of God on them, sent them out in the power of his Spirit—how could they retreat back into their fishing boats? But, as one Bible teacher says, "Even though Jesus be

crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples still must *eat!*” (Beasley-Murray, 399, in Keener, 1227).

I don’t think the story asks us to stand in judgment on Jesus ’friends and followers. Instead, I think we stand in their shoes, in their sandals. The world has changed for us too. Like them, we still need to make a life—still need to eat, still need to tend relationships with family, still need to fill our days with work, with conversations, with stories. The Upper Room commission and gift of the Spirit recounted just a few sentences earlier In ch 20, it doesn’t take us out the world; instead, this is how Jesus remains with us—and we in him—in the heart of the world, whatever the world may look like. It means that in our muddled workaday, at times stressed, at times delightful existence, we walk always along *the* Way, the Truth, and the Life. It means that when we go fishing, or when we do our click-and-collect pickup at Superstore, or we visit with neighbors from across the driveway, the Spirit of Jesus dwells with us and among us, working the Father of Jesus ’work in our worldly lives.

Just nights ago, Jesus was seized, tortured, and violently executed—what amounted to a legal lynching. Peter and his friends were traumatized. When, on the third day, Mary first found his tomb empty and then found him breathing and back from the dead, calling her name—that was another, different kind of shock. When Jesus ignores locked doors to draw near to his friends, he doesn’t draw them out of the tumult, instead he sends them into it.

Where do you go when the world has changed?

§4 A second question faces us with an abiding truth: Wherever we go—whether we try to get back to normal, just try to make it through, or attempt to ride this as the wave of the future—wherever we go, we can’t get away from ourselves.

This story puts two characters in the spotlight. One, of course, is Jesus. Jesus, who he is and what he does, is the steady center of this story. Everything turns on seeing and knowing who he is—that he is, as the beloved disciple exclaims, “the Lord.” He’s the one, in the praise of Ps 145, who “satisfies the desires of every living thing,” who “gives them their food at the right time,” who “hear their cries and saves them.” He’s the Lord, as Peter learns, who asks us to do his Father’s will just as he has—all the way up to and through hurt and death. This story, of course, is about him.

But it’s also about Peter. Or should I say, Simon? Or is that, Simon son of John? Or Simon Peter? The story can’t decide on what to call this person, perhaps because he hasn’t settled on who he is.

We meet him, in v 4, in the midst of exhaustion and failure. V 7 makes clear that he isn’t seeing things right, that he can’t make out who Jesus is without a fair bit of help. This echoes his earlier instability. For someone Jesus called “The Rock,” Peter’s not very steady. On Thursday night Peter interrupted Jesus to say he’d go anywhere Jesus went—“Lord, I will lay down my life

for you”—and that evening he has his sword out, ready to fight the mob for Jesus sake—Jesus didn’t think too highly of that, actually. But only a few hours later, in the predawn chill of Friday morning, he’s lying and swearing up and down that he’s never met this Jesus. Not so steady.

We meet Peter, not only tired, hungry, and with empty nets. We meet him still in the shadow of shame. He’s not lived up to his friendship to Jesus. Peter's not lived out who he thought he was. He’s failed Jesus, and he’s failed himself.

The story, in v 8, includes the strange note that Peter was naked on the boat and that he ties his clothes back on before swimming to shore to meet Jesus. Scholars weigh in with all sorts of opinions about what this might mean. Two realities are clear. First, net fishing in the Galilean Sea was hard, wet work. It makes sense that fishermen might strip down for the job. But, second, nakedness within Jewish first century Palestine was always viewed as shameful—both for the naked person and for anyone who saw them. We today are learning about the toxic effects of body shaming; we’re learning that God created and loves our flesh (Jesus wasn’t born with clothes on). But in the story, Peter’s nakedness echoes his experience of shame.

Who is Peter going to be now?

A first good sign is that he swims toward Jesus, not away from him. He swims to Jesus. Wherever we are, that is never less than the best way to be holy and whole, to be our truest selves. Whatever people call us, Jesus gives us true stability, wholeness, and hope.

But, after a meal full symbolism and compassion, Jesus presses this question. Peter, who are you going to be? “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

That’s the question, isn’t it? Peter, yes, you’ve followed me before; but now, Peter, are you going to choose me over and above all this? It’s unclear what Jesus gestures at here: the food? the boats and tackle? the other men huddled around the fire?

I take Jesus to be facing Peter with a choice between “getting back to normal” and jumping into the uncertain, often stormy waters where Jesus walks. Jesus takes Peter back to the hours when Jesus was on trial, the hours before the cock crew, hours where Peter turned away from Jesus three times. Now, Three times Jesus asks him, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter is asked to choose again who he’s going to be.

Each and every time, Peter chooses Jesus, and Jesus, in return, makes clear what this choice must mean. Just like the Good Shepherd didn’t run away from the wolves and bandits but “laid down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10.11), so Peter too is called to follow in this shepherding work: feeding lambs, tending sheep, stretching out his hands to be bound, being led out to lay down his life too for the sake of the little ones Jesus loves.

Jesus gathers all this in two words: “Follow me.”

§5 Our second question, Who are we going to be?, finds its answer in the last: What do we do now?

Just under a month ago I had the privilege of listening in on the MC Sask Dreaming Church beyond Pandemic town hall. Responding to an open invitation, folks from around MC Sask shared what they've experienced in these months living in the shadow of COVID-19 and how they glimpse God moving. I heard that pandemic has been tough, disappointing, but also brought a few unexpected gifts—conversations we wouldn't otherwise have had, growth in patience, finding connections through new technological tools.

In sharing particularly about what it might mean to move forward, one person's comment has particularly stuck with me. She said,

We need to get beyond our church walls, walking in our communities as people of hope.

We still want to meet together, but there's so much more out there.

Another person offered the twin words *solidarity* and *embrace*. These pictures and terms resonate at a deep level with what Jesus invited Peter into: walking that same path he did, standing with and caring for sheep often scattered or harassed without a shepherd.

This wasn't normal for Peter. I'm not sure it'll be all that normal or familiar for us. Peter was a fisherman, familiar with boats and sweat and fish scales. He knew how to get a good price for his fish at market. He knew how to mend nets. I'm not sure what he knew about being a shepherd. But this is what Jesus calls him to: "Feed my lambs; shepherd my sheep." It's as a shepherd that Scripture remembers him, particularly in 1 Pet ch 5. Jesus invited him into something unfamiliar, something he might not be good at, something new.

Today some congregations are opening up, cordoning off pews, placing stacks of masks and giant pump bottles of hand sanitizer at their doors, running multiple services as they try to keep this pandemic from spreading. Other congregations venture deeper into the work of maintaining relationships, praise, and prayer even when distanced via the Internet, Zoom, drive-in church—one small town congregation has the pianist playing hymns from her front porch for folks walking by. We've learned to sew our own masks, manage kids' schooling at home, even protest in physically-distanced ways.

How is Jesus asking us to follow him now? Where do we need to dive into the water to be closer to him?

There will be changes to be made as we find answers to these questions. Even if we could just go back to normal, with all our old songs, handshakes, and hugs, we probably shouldn't. Because the world has changed. *It's* not going back to normal. Our neighbors are not going back to normal. Pandemic has altered the landscape of their hearts—and ours.

What does the Good Shepherd do? Doesn't he "leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (Lk 15.4). Jesus finds Peter on the lake. Jesus finds Nathanael under a fig tree. Jesus finds a worried mom in pagan Tyre, an ostracized woman at a well in Samaria, a man longing for sight on the road from Jericho, Lazarus dead in a tomb. He

finds hungry people nearby and on the distant shores of pagan Galilee. He travels from North to South “driving out evil spirits and healing all who were sick” (Mt 8.16-17).

As Jesus told Peter, he tells us. When we find ourselves in a changed world, his invitation remains the same: “Follow me.”

At that Abbotsford Gathering last summer, I was surprised by a very contemporary praise song that we sung all together, something I’m more familiar hearing on a Spotify playlist than sung by a few hundred Mennonites. It’s a Hillsong UNITED chorus that I think is going to be in the new hymnal called “Oceans.”

As I’ve contemplated this story from Jn ch 21, the bridge from that song we were singing at Abbotsford keeps echoing in my mind:

Spirit, lead me where my trust is without borders;
let me walk upon the waters wherever you would call me.
Take me deeper than my feet would ever wander,
and my faith will be made stronger in the presence of my Savior.

Though the words call up another encounter between Jesus and Peter on the lake (Mt 14.28-32), they also resonate with Peter here, leaping out of the boat to follow Jesus, to be close to him.

I think the invitation, today, is the same for us. Amen.