

Vision: Where to Cast Our Nets

John 21: 4-8
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After losing a sales job in the recent recession, my friend Bob was devastated. But he finally found a job, and he had a new attitude. I've come across more than one person who's said, "I am so glad I lost my job." It's one of those surprising things they had never expected to say – as nobody in their right mind does! Instead of sweating it out and trying to keep up, Bob found his new work had become a labor of love. He had more – or took more—time for his family. Perhaps he enjoyed things because he had become less attached to the trappings of working to succeed, and was living more closely to his true priorities.

Second chances can allow us to reorient our lives. Today we're hearing about a new vision for Fairfield's future. Like second chances, new visions can allow us as a church to reclaim a clear sense of God's purpose, a transforming sense of God's presence, and an expectant sense of God's power in our midst. Today's Gospel reading is about second chances for the disciples who also needed a reorientation, a new vision.

Those disciples who had been fishermen had once had a dream. They'd been following Jesus with excitement and wonder until, of course, he was crucified and buried. Jesus made several post-resurrection appearances, and a few are recorded: his appearance in the Upper Room, his appearance to the two walking on the Road to Emmaus, and finally, John's Gospel records one on the Sea of Tiberius. At least seven of the forlorn disciples had gone fishing for all night, and they'd not caught a single fish. Just as the sunlight was creating a pencil-thin grey line distinguishing lake from shoreline, someone from the beach calls to them.

John 21 4-8 ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children [lads], you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He 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. ⁷That 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. ⁸But 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.

They came ashore, and beside a campfire with fish and bread being roasted, Jesus asked them to bring some of the fish. Verses 11-12 read, *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.'*

Jesus had gone away. It happened sometime after the first Easter, no one knows exactly, but long enough for the disciples to have left Jerusalem and made the long trek back to Galilee. It was home for them, the natural place to return once it seemed that everything had come to an end. There were seven of them, John says, which means that the disciples were already coming apart at the seams, some of them going one direction while the others went another. These seven decide to go fishing, and that makes a lot of sense. Fishing is a good excuse for thinking, after all, for just sitting quietly and letting silence do its healing work.

These were the old fishing grounds, and these guys had gone to their old familiar jobs; fishing was their "normal and safe" thing to do. So when they decided to go fishing (Peter had suggested it), it is not a decision to daydream but a decision to return to their former way of life, to go back to the only thing they know how to do without Jesus.

He is gone, after all. They have not seen him since the appearance in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. And while that was a powerful time none of them will ever forget, it is time to get on with life. Memory is one thing, but the future is another. He is gone, and it is time for them to start looking after themselves again. So they go fishing.

They should have known better than to have staked their lives on something that could come to such a quick and bloody end. They should have known that it would all boil down to business as usual, back to the grind, all their wild, joyful

expectation reduced to a resignation as they go back to their nets. But through the night, they catch not a single fish—none. They are sitting in the dark and watch the sky change color as the sun rises behind the hills.

Just as a morning light reveals a faint shoreline, they hear him. Through the mist someone calls out to them across the water, guessing the truth—that they have no fish, and suggesting they try the other side of the boat. So they do, and suddenly shiny fins glint in the morning light and a huge swale of fish fill their nets. It is déjà vu again: the boats, the nets, the stranger calling out to them. It is not the end after all. “It is the Lord!” says the beloved disciples, also guessing the truth. (inspired by B. Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications: Boston, 1995, p. 86)



Peter throws himself into the water, leaving the others with the hard work. They scramble for their oars, catching up with him just as he reaches the beach. And all of them arrive to find a charcoal fire with fish on it, and bread, and Jesus their beloved cook. “Come,” he tells his wet, happy disciples. “and have some breakfast.” If you’ve ever had breakfast on the beach, your imagination draws you into seeing reddish coals glowing in the sand, its heat rising in the cold mist, wood smoke curling through your hair, fish sizzling over the low flames, the sound of the waves curling ashore. It’s not a dream: he is really serving breakfast, and you are ready!

Are you like those disciples who had retreated to fishing in the boat? Are we as a church—Fairfield--a bit like that? It's really easy to become so, to retreat from faith a bit. We get busy with things and get overwhelmed with just keeping up with duties and endless responsibilities. Along with this; we tend to focus on what we can humanly control; we get so rational! In fact, we begin to doubt there's any real mystery to it, this "religion" stuff. We see our achievements: a beautiful new Family Center. It's peopled with kids in Upwards and concerts and provides welcome to CARITAS and celebrations throughout the year. Boy Scouts camp out on our grounds every few months and swell our halls on weeknights. Children skip through tree house halls and into rooms lovingly designed. A bright nursery shelters infants who become toddlers, then preschoolers and up. Children ring and sing sweet songs in worship. Groups gather to study and pray and hear one another's lives. Volunteers feed the homeless and come to know them. Generous bags of food spill over for MCEF. We support women and families coming out of homelessness. We deliver Christmas gifts for children of jailed parents. We send forth people in our midst to far-away ministries of love and care. Isn't it wonderful!? It is! These ministries spill over God's love into the world -- through us, you and me! They come about through our sacrificial offering of our money—and through our God-given gifts and talents we share.

Yet I fear that we tend to forget that WE did not do this on our own. It is God who has done this, who has given the inspiration and the courage to go forward. It is the spirit of God that has brought each one of us here. There is a mysterious voice that—despite our lifting up "good" ideas and rational and proven ways of doing things, like fishing with those disciples—a voice keeps calling us to trust him. That in the end, casting our nets where Jesus tells us is all that matters.

Fairfield is listening for that voice over the waters. As we set out to seek a new pastor, we are charged with a process that helps us to stand back, see what God has done, is doing, and wants to do with us as the Body of Christ. We need to

review where we've been, who we are in the present, and where we believe God is calling us. The Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) will use this statement to find a person appropriate to lead us to follow that vision, a person whom we believe God is already preparing for ministry at Fairfield. And at 10 o'clock today, we heard the report from the Vision & Planning Task Force, who have compiled, studied and prayed over data to provide a vision for Fairfield for the coming years.

We have some likeness to the disciples in today's Gospel story, and I believe we as individuals and as a church are not so different from them. Those disciples, thinking Jesus –who had died--wasn't about to help them, they went back to fishing – earning a living again. Like them, you and I tend to rely on our rational selves, our corporate models of organizations. We easily fall back on our sensible ideas, doing what we want, rather than trusting in God's mysterious voice, for moving into the future.

And we must note the disciples' response that early morning of bad fishing: they obeyed the mysterious call from shore to cast their nets on the right side, the other side. They obeyed the voice, even though it did not make rational sense. There weren't any fish on one side, so why would there be any on the other side? But as they responded to the mysterious call, dipped their nets into the water there, fish swarmed into the nets: abundance followed. And Jesus was yet present with them, ready to feed them.

You and me: as followers in the 21st century, it seems we keep finding ourselves relying on what we know to “get things done,” make things happen -- without really listening, without trusting the mystery in a voice of God that comes to us “across the waters and over the mist.” We are fishing (we are called to be “fishers of men”) and we ever need to listen for the voice of Jesus to guide us as to **where to cast our nets**. That only happens by prayer and attuning our hearts to listen, just as in Stephen's sermon last week. It happens when we have an anticipation and expectation of God's intervention, that we can step out in faith.

And it happens with joy that Jesus is beside us, with a breakfast sizzling on the lakeside campfire, and it is ready for eating. What a vision!

Gracious Lord, help us to live in great expectation. Help us to refuse to believe that our nets will stay empty or our nights will last forever. Help us have ears to hear the voice that can turn all our dead ends into new beginnings, second chances. And as we examine the vision for this church, may your spirit be with us as we cast our nets for your kingdom. Amen.