

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

JOHN 21:1-19

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon 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.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So 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. ¹²Jesus 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. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶A 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." ¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸Very 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."¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

That Morning on the Beach
John 21: 1-19

May 5, 2019

On the weather channel a few years ago, I watched a video of a young man who was fishing in a kayak on what must have been the ocean. And the camera was placed so you were looking right at him as he was reeling in a pretty good-sized fish and you could see all the open water behind him. As he was trying to land the fish you saw right behind him a huge shark jump out of the water and take his fish. When he realized what just happened you could see a series of emotions cross his face from surprise, too, I can't believe that too, Holy Cow get me out of here! I'm sure you can find it if you look for it on YouTube.

Our Gospel lesson this morning has many of these elements and while it is sort of a fish story too, it is also so very much more than that isn't it? Like many of the stories in the bible is has a deeper story, one that often lies just beneath the surface. Sometimes in deep water and sometimes not, where, like a fish or a shark, it is waiting to be drawn to the surface. So let's go fishing a little bit this morning and see if we can hook something that will speak to us and hold us through the week. What do you say?

At the close of last week's sermon, we found Thomas and the disciples meeting with the risen Jesus and rejoicing that he was alive. He breathed on them the Holy Spirit and blessed them with peace and then he is gone. When we catch up with the disciples today some time has gone by. We don't really know what they have been doing. Maybe planning to continue with Jesus' ministry, maybe trying to get organized, maybe they have been writing down the stories of their lives with Jesus so we could read them later, thank God, or maybe they are just waiting.

The bible isn't real clear about any of that. But we do know that the distance from Jerusalem to the sea of Tiberius which is also the Sea of Galilee, is 80 miles north from where they are when we left them last and it would be a pretty good walk. So, some time has gone by and we know that Peter was not one to sit around so instead of what we might expect them to be doing they decide to go fishing! Others have suggested that they were somewhat disillusioned after all the Easter appearances. Jesus was now gone and they didn't really know what to do now. That may be part of the story.

One of our favorite movies at the Taylor household is "The Princess Bride" and in it there are 3 interesting but incompetent kidnappers who kidnap Princess Buttercup. When their plans are foiled by the Man-in-Black, the 2 remaining characters are found disillusioned and unsure of what to do as well. But then they remember that their leader, Vicinni, told them that if things go badly to always go back to the beginning, back to where you started and I think in a way that that is what Peter and the disciples are doing.

They are going back to where Jesus called them the first time, back to the calm and reassuring presence of the sea. Fishing can be very therapeutic...sometimes, if a shark doesn't jump near the boat, and maybe they just needed to be back home where things are a bit more familiar. Perhaps it is like many experiences with God that

we both know and read about in the bible. That once you've met the risen Christ and been filled with the holy spirit that there needs to be some time to let that settle in, to think about what that means for your life. How will you live from here on out and what does that experience teach you about your relationship with God? What is God calling you to do?

The epistle lesson today is also a calling story where Saul, after hearing the Lord's voice, needed time to figure out how he was going to be a new and different person in the world as he served God. And of course, God shows him. And if we remember correctly even Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days after his baptism and encounter with the Holy Spirit.

And maybe Peter who is the one to suggest they go fishing is still trying to work through his feelings of guilt about having denied Jesus three times. Maybe they are all working through some things as they consider their own unworthiness to be disciples. And this is where the story gets interesting and where we find ourselves in the story. Because this story strikes me as being pivotal to understanding the power of God's forgiveness and grace and if anyone needs that forgiveness and grace, it is probably Peter and the disciples. And it is most certainly you and me.

It calls to mind a stanza from the Hymn "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" where the lyric says "*And from my stricken heart with tears. two wonders I confess--the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*" And this is our story too isn't it? Pastor Austin Crenshaw Shelley shared this wonderful story in a past issue of the Christian Century magazine. It's one I've shared before but one that really speaks to me. She tells it like this.

"In a china cabinet in the corner of our dining room sits a coffee mug with a picture of a cardinal on it. The mug is not especially beautiful. Unlike other favorite mugs that nest just so into my cupped hands, this one's shape is odd and its handle worn thin. If *Antiques Roadshow* were to stop by for coffee, on a good day they might value the cardinal mug at ten cents, give or take a nickel for the sizable chip along the rim.

Yet this unappealing vessel graces our china cabinet, rather than helping to fill our garbage bin. That's because the mug holds more than coffee or tea. What steeps in the cardinal mug is story. It once belonged to my mother-in-law, who treasured it before I did. Before that, it belonged in a set of six cardinal mugs, an incentive for selling wrapping paper or cookie dough or some similarly frivolous school fund-raising product. My husband Mark, then 12 years old, apparently had a knack for sales—or perhaps his big brown eyes and adorable dimples won over potential buyers. In any case, he bested his classmates' efforts and won the coveted prize.

The way his mother tells the story, she pulled up to the school just in time to see Mark sprinting toward her, arms clasped around the cardboard box of half a dozen cardinal mugs that he had already planned to give to her. And then she watched helplessly as he and the box and every one of those mugs crashed to the pavement. One mug survived with just a chip. As I unwrapped this gift from her before Mark and I married, she told its story. "He isn't perfect," she concluded. "Love him anyway."

I was thinking that it would make perfect sense for me to probably just sit down now because that is the whole story of our lives isn't it. At least that is how I feel most times. And our readings and encounters with the risen Christ this morning pretty much affirm that. That God uses broken, cowardly, chipped up, angry, hopeless, and basically confused people like you and me and Peter and Saul to take care of his family in this world. That we aren't any of us perfect, but God loves us and trusts us anyway. He must be out of his mind!

Jesus is not giving up on Peter and he's not giving up on us. He keeps bursting through the closed doors of our lives, showing up on the abandoned beaches along the way, and even if we just go back to doing what we did before, God keeps crashing the party and I can tell you from experience that that is true. Grace is a pain sometimes, isn't it? Just when we want to go fishing and forget the whole thing Jesus comes along and gives us another chance. Not only another chance but several chances.

And most of us can probably say we have denied Jesus more than Peter and maybe even done things worse than Saul. I don't know. But I do know that sometimes in moments that are beyond our understanding, we experience Jesus standing on the metaphorical beaches of our lives. Those quiet moments when the world stands still. Those times when we come face to face with the Divine. Where He has grilled fish. He has made bread. And he feeds us. Just as he will at this table today. And then he asks us a question...do you love me? ...do you love me? And maybe like Peter, you and I stammer a little. We say, "yes," but we know it is only partly true and so, He asks us again, and this time he is looking you right in the eye...Do you love me? This time we know the jig is up and so we say, "Lord, you know everything, you know what a failure I have been and can be and yet you love me in spite of or maybe even because of those failures. I don't know...but you know, and I'm not going to resist you anymore. So, Yes! Oh, Yes! I love you!"

I was recently introduced to a beautiful song by my daughter who says it speaks to her on a deeply spiritual level. It is called **You Say** by Lauren Daigle and I can't help but think that Peter and I would have made this song our own this morning. It goes like this.

You Say by Lauren Daigle

*I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low?
Remind me once again just who I am, because I need to know (ooh oh)*

(chorus)

*You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
You say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, oh You say that I am Yours
And I believe (I), oh I believe (I)
What You say of me (I)
I believe*

*The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me
In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity, (ooh oh)[chorus]*

*Taking all I have and now I'm laying it at Your feet
You have every failure God, and You'll have every victory, (ooh oh) [chorus]*

Songwriters: Paul Mabury / Lauren Ashley Daigle / Jason Ingram

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIaT8Jl2zpl>

Maybe you too have felt that you were not someone that God would or could use to further the kingdom. But you see, our God is the God of chipped cups and hungry and broken people, who are made whole in and through his love. He sees you as loved, strong, whole, and complete, and no matter where you are on this walk of faith God will use you. I'll close with a quote from author and spiritual leader Rachel Held Evans who died most unexpectedly yesterday at the age of 37. She said, "This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there is always room for more." Thanks be to God. Let us pray.