

John 21:1-19 The Sacred on Display
Acts 9:1-8
May 4, 2025

It is a remarkable scene that confronts us in the last chapter of the Gospel of John. On the shore of the Sea of Galilee where for many of the disciples it had all begun a few years earlier, the resurrected Lord met them once more. For the ones who were there it was an after Easter starting over. For Peter it ran a little deeper.

The story is familiar. At the last meal they shared on the night of the arrest, Peter, as well as the others, but most notably Peter, had sworn his allegiance and devotion to Jesus even if it meant he would die in the process. Not long afterwards, a matter of hours, he denied three times that he knew Jesus, much less was one of the twelve. It was a breathtaking failure.

After Easter one can imagine how awkward things must have been. What does one say in such moments? Jesus started right in by asking them about the fishing, how was it going? They hadn't any luck all night, until upon instruction they dropped their nets on the other side of the boats and received a miraculous catch, reminiscent of the calling of the first disciples according to the way Luke tells the story in his 5th chapter.

After breakfast, Jesus turned and addressed Peter directly. It was an important and inevitable encounter. One rightly supposes that they could not go on as if

the denials had never happened. Jesus asked Peter three times, "do you love me?" All three times Peter said, "yes," but it got a little under his skin. Three times Jesus told him, "feed my sheep," as he put it. It was a call to service, which means, of course, it was a restoration.

At the end of the scene, Jesus makes the same invitation by which he had initially called them, he simply said, "follow me." Peter was forgiven and reconciled. The scene is very down-to-earth, which is a good thing, because if the disciples had been pressed to find their way to heaven in order to be restored, it would have been a non-starter.

One suspects that the impossibility of it stands as the reason they went back to their fishing in the first place. What *else* was there to do? Heavenly things happen on earthly ground. We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

By contrast, we have seen the apocalyptic vision of the heavenly court in the Book of Revelation. This morning, the Call to Worship comes from the fifth chapter and contains the splendid magnificence of the heavenly scene about which we learned last Sunday.

There is a throne room where God reigns, and the real decisions are made. There are twenty-four other thrones with living creatures and angels and spirits all caught up in perpetual worship, carrying out the will of God in the cosmos and on the earth.

The scene makes it clear that the earthly governments and earthly sanctuaries, no matter how grand and powerful they may be, are small and insignificant set next to the heavenly vision. The distinction is so great that one is forced to conclude that there is a great chasm separating what people are doing on earth, and what God is doing in eternity, which means *on earth* as well

When caught up in historical events, that is, the human-driven earthbound side of the equation; or just the demands of everyday life; one might come to wonder how God works in the world. Is it through nature? Does it have to do with a kind of coincidental good that accompanies human success and sometimes failure? The Divine Coincidence? Is it science? Is it politics? Is it economics? Or is it something very different, seemingly unrelated?

The question is not easily answered because it may be, “yes,” and, “no.” It is what God makes it. But from the account in John of Peter’s restoration, and that of the others, it is clear that what God was doing, though it was happening on earth, had nothing at all to do with what the political and religious leaders were trying to do in their own wisdom and according to their own plans.

Let me walk that back a little, and think about it. The human leaders did execute Jesus on their own authority; and it was also according to God’s will, but the overlap ends there. They thought they were keeping the peace, dispensing with trouble, putting

down an insurrection. *God was reconciling the world.* I doubt even one person involved saw it that way.

Back on the shore by the lake, it looked like breakfast, with an abundance of large fish. Caesar is no where to be found. The eternal significance is, however, much more, very different. It wasn’t just Peter that was brought back into the fold, and not just the others with him, but in a sense, all of us.

Certainly this relationship between Jesus and Peter led to a lifetime of devotion to the spiritual movement that became Christianity; and to the early development of an organizational life that persists to this day. Yet every step of the way the people who have been involved in the journey have been weak and flawed and vulnerable like Peter was.

One is right to conclude that if Peter is restored, we might also be restored, whatever our weaknesses and flaws and vulnerabilities, and whatever our mistakes, even the whoppers, may be.

During the Easter season, instead of a text from the Old Testament, the Lectionary takes readings from the Acts of the Apostles (it is interesting to see that the lectionary, which is not sacred like the scriptures themselves, does not take the Old Testament readings from the Old Testament at Easter time).

This morning, the reading is from the ninth chapter, which is the account of the Damascus Road experience. It is the account of Paul’s conversion from

a very zealous devotee of the pharisaic brand of Judaism to a follower of the same Lord that restored Peter.

In some ways the stories are very similar. Both of them are living out their faith in ways that exhibit their humanity, and not in the best sense; but both are confronted along the way by Jesus in a way that re-orientes them, draws them in. Paul was headed up into the Syria and Peter went back to his fishing. God was doing something else. It was the Sacred on Display in down-to-earth garb.

One of the interesting and challenging facets of the life of faith is to be confronted with this difference, not only between the actions and plans of the Pilates and Caiaphases and Tiberiases of history, but with our own plans, for even the faithful sometimes find themselves at odds with the actions of God. Yet it does not destroy us, or separate us ultimately from God. Jesus meets us wherever we are. The sacred display demands high language.

Which brings me to the psalm of the day, which is the 30th. It is the song of someone who had been at the lowest point and then lifted up. One can see Jesus singing it, and Peter and Paul, even oneself. Hear it at the conclusion of these reflections on this third Sunday of Easter; hear it with Peter and Paul fresh on your mind; hear it with yourself and your own life, with the life of the church and the world in your heart:

I will extol thee, O Lord; for thou hast lifted me up,
and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me.
O Lord my God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast
healed me.

O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave:
thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go
down to the pit.

Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks
at the remembrance of his holiness.
For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is
life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy
cometh in the morning.

And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.
Lord, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to
stand strong: but thou didst hide thy face, and I
was troubled.

I cried to thee, O Lord; and unto the Lord I made
supplication. What profit is there in my blood,
when I go down to the pit?
Shall the dust praise thee? Shall *it* declare thy
truth?

Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon me: Lord, be thou
my helper.

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing:
thou hast put off my sackcloth,
and girded me with gladness;
To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and
not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever.

Romans 16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

8 Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.

9 Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

10 Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

11 Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew.

Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

16 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ send greetings.

17 I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. 19 Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

21 Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews.

22 I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.

23 Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. [24]

25 Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Phoebe, a letter of introduction and reference
Priscilla and Aquila - the Edict of Claudius, Acts 18
Greetings - all the different names of people that Paul knew that were apparently in Rome

Then the warning about troublemakers
The end again
The amanuensis - Tertius
And finally the final blessing

The theory of the reverse letter when the letters of Paul were being collected, perhaps to Corinth and/or Ephesus. The musings of biblical scholars.

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