

Fish on the Beach – May 6

The narrative lectionary, which we use for our worship scripture readings, leaves out this 21st chapter of John's gospel. It dives right into the book of Acts and the conversion of Paul. Interestingly, the traditional lectionary will use both John 21 and the Acts story today, although they'll go further in the John reading.

As I wrote in my newsletter article, although John isn't the easiest of the four gospels to deal with, it is the gospel in which I find myself most captivated by Jesus himself. In the other three gospels, I fall in love with Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God. He ushers in a new world in which love and justice reign.

That vision ignites my commitment to preach and work for justice, especially for the most vulnerable...the most neglected...the most oppressed. In John's gospel, it's Jesus I fall in love with.

Now, that ultimately leads to a new way of living...a way of service and love as Jesus commanded and demonstrated. But for me, the Jesus of John's gospel works on me from the inside more than the others. So, I'm not ready to leave John behind. In fact, in my personal devotions, I've started over.

In worship, we'll read part of chapter 21 this week and we'll read the last part next week. Then we'll dip into John's letters for a few weeks to get us to Pentecost.

Many scholars believe that chapter 21 of John's gospel is an epilogue...that it wasn't included in the original but was added later.

Maybe that's true. But what is also true is that it very effectively takes us back through the whole gospel. It's a sort of microcosm of the gospel, only now seen through the work of the resurrected and ascended Jesus.

So let's walk through and look at some of the echoes from earlier in the gospel.

We'll start with the time of day. Daybreak. Throughout John's gospel, the theme of the bright sunlight of day vs. the shadowy darkness of night has been repeated.

It started right from the get-go. In his prologue, John says the true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Throughout the gospel – belief and trust are shown in the light of day and confusion and disbelief at night. It starts with Nicodemus who comes to Jesus under the cover of night. He's curious...something draws him to Jesus.

But he can't understand what Jesus is trying to say, so he walks away into the night, befuddled and still not fully believing.

The Nicodemus story is contrasted with the Samaritan woman at the well. She meets Jesus in the bright noon sun. Jesus and the woman also have a conversation and she too is initially confused.

But then, she gets it. She understands what Jesus means when he says he is living water for her parched soul. And she desperately wants that water. She understands that Jesus is her connection to the deep, flowing, river of life.

The night in John is a symbol of disbelief and rejection of Jesus. The light of day symbolizes belief and new life.

Jesus' arrest and trial happen at night. Peter's denial happens at night.

Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus at daybreak.

Then later that day, in the evening when the light is fading, the disciples are huddled behind a locked door. They are fearful, disbelieving. But Jesus breaks into that darkness and breathes the spirit and new life into them.

Now notice the time of day here – it's daybreak. The disciples are emerging from the darkness of misunderstanding and disbelief. The light of the world has come upon them and chased away the shadows.

Out of the darkness of grief, death, and sorrow breaks the dawn of new life. In a sense this is a sort of resurrection scene for the disciples. They come out of the tomb of failure. Their empty fishing nets could be seen as symbols of their failure, not just at fishing, but their failure as disciples in Jesus' last hours.

Jesus turns their fishing failure into abundance.

Abundance is another big theme in John's gospel. Nobody knows what the significance of precisely 153 fish is, but what we do get is what it signifies. It signifies abundance. In the night of disbelief, the nets return empty, time after time. At the break of day as the sun rises over the horizon, when the light of Jesus appears on the beach, the nets are so full they can't haul them in.

That abundance was also reflected in the very beginning of John's gospel – from the fullness of Jesus we have received grace upon grace...overflowing grace. This story will also remind us of the abundance of water turned to wine – 150 gallons – at the wedding in Cana. And Jesus himself said, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

This should also evoke images of the feeding of the multitude when two loaves of bread and 5 fish from the hand of Jesus became food enough for all.

Grace upon grace tastes like abundance – abundant wine, abundant bread and fish, abundant life. All from the bread of life.

We may not at first think of this scene as a scene of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Remember John doesn't really have one of those. But this scene along with the wedding at Cana and the feeding of the multitude invite us to expand our vision of sacrament...to see that sacrament goes far beyond our formal celebration of communion in worship.

In our Lutheran theology of the sacraments, it is the element and the word together that bring Christ to us. The bread is ordinary bread, until the words this is my body given for you are spoken. And in that moment, the word and bread come together to bring Christ's real presence to us.

And in the words, this is my blood shed for you, the word and the wine come together to bring Christ's real presence to us.

But word isn't just words.... this is the Word who was in the beginning with God and was God. The Word through whom everything in creation came into being.

The Word flowed into all creation, long before the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. John's gospel is an invitation to see all of creation sacramentally – to see all of creation as an outward manifestation of the real presence of Christ...the Word.

Now that all sounds very lofty...until it comes down to Jesus on the beach, fish sizzling over a fire, warm bread broken and given by his own hand.

To those disciples still hurting from the guilt and shame of their own failure in Jesus' final hours, he simply says, come and have breakfast. This is a meal of healing...a meal of forgiveness from their best friend. It's a meal that will give them the nourishment for their new life as disciples of the risen and ascended Jesus.

That same thing happens to us in Holy Communion. The Word with the little chunk of bread or wafer and the little sip of wine are the way we physically experience a reality we can only

grasp by faith. That Christ is truly present in that bread and wine...that Christ becomes a part of our very bodies.

Then by extension, our formal sacrament is the embodiment of an even bigger truth. That Christ is truly present in all of creation.

As you receive communion this morning, as you hear the words, taste the bread and wine, or juice I invite you to imagine Jesus standing up here, fish sizzling over a fire, warm bread in his hands...imagine his love for you as you as receive that bread...this is my body given for you.