

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

John 21

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Amarillo, Texas
March 23, 2025

There is in Celtic mythology the notion of “thin places” in the universe, where the visible and the invisible world come into their closest proximity. To seek such places is the vocation of the wise and the good, and those who find them find the clearest communication between the temporal and the eternal. Perhaps John 21 is among the “thin places” where the “eternal” and the “every day” touch.

Introduction

Still trying to comprehend both the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus’ followers must have surely been in shock from all that they had experienced. Their king had been humiliated between two criminals, but – in the end – proved himself to be the Lord, the cosmic Christ.

Manifested Again (21:1)

John begins his last chapter with “After these things,” calling us to read chapter 21 as a continuation of the events of chapter 20. In much the same fashion, “again” binds the appearance of Jesus in chapter 21 with his resurrection appearances in chapter 20 (Mary of Magdala and the disciples on two occasions). By now, the disciples had left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee. They found themselves at the Sea of Tiberias, which is an alternative name (only found in John’s Gospel) for Lake Galilee.

Gone Fishing (21:2-3)

John introduces us to the seven disciples who experienced this “third appearance” of Jesus (v. 14). We should not be surprised that Peter, the leader, is the first to be named. It is common in John’s Gospel for Peter to bear both names, Simon Peter. Thomas, who just played a major role in the last chapter with his proclamation of Jesus as his “Lord and God” (20:28), is once again identified by both his Aramaic and Greek names (11:16; 20:24).

The next character on the list is Nathanael. Although Nathanael was not really one of The Twelve, he was, in the broader sense, a follower of Jesus and, thus, a disciple. We were first introduced to Nathanael in the very first chapter (1:45-51), where Jesus indicated that Nathanael was a pure-hearted person (no guile, 1:47). Interestingly, James and John are not named, but simply called “the sons of Zebedee.” Anyone who has read the other three Gospels will note that James and John, who play such a pivotal role, along with Peter, as Jesus’ “special three,” are never actually named in the fourth Gospel. This omission of their proper names is another indication that, indeed, one of these “sons of Zebedee,” John himself, has written this Gospel. James is not an option as the author because he was already martyred before the composition of this particular Gospel.

Finally, we have two unnamed disciples, simply referred to as “two others.” Given the fact that seven is a symbolic number, especially in John’s writings (Revelation 1:20), many scholars have concluded that these seven disciples symbolize a perfect, or complete, number of disciples.

Suddenly, Simon Peter announced that he was going fishing, and the others agreed to go along. Several New Testament scholars make much of the fact that the disciples returned to their old vocation – the vocation they held before Jesus called them to follow him. We, however, probably should not see their fishing as a sign that they were abandoning their call as disciples. Even though Jesus be crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples must still eat!

Most likely, the disciples were in Galilee in obedience to the Lord’s command (Mark 14:28; 16:7). Evidently, the disciples, at this point, had no clear plan for moving forward with the formation of the church. The general impression left is of men without a purpose.

How to find your purpose. The wrong thing to do is to ask, “What do I want from life?” The right question, as Viktor Frankl put it, is “What does life ask of me?” What problem is out there that I’m equipped to tackle? The answer to your life’s deepest questions are not inside; they are outside. (David Brooks, message to the Boston College Class of 2021, 5/25/21; homileticsonline.com)

While the symbolism may be subtle, we should not miss that the disciples were out fishing at “night.” To be sure, nighttime was the best time for fishing, but, given John’s use of the symbolism of darkness (3:2, 19-21; 13:30; 20:1), we cannot help but think that John is indicating that the disciples needed another manifestation of the risen Messiah in order to move from darkness to light.

Jesus on the Beach (21:4-6)

Just as Mary Magdalene did not recognize Jesus in the previous chapter – thinking him to be the gardener – the disciples, likewise, did not recognize Jesus standing on the shoreline. Was it too early in the morning to be able to see more than just a silhouette? Had they been providentially prevented, like others, from being able to recognize the resurrected Christ (see Luke 24:16; John 20:14-15)?

Jesus called out to the seven disciples, “You guys don’t have any fish/food, do you?” Translations usually use the form of address “children,” but an English equivalent probably comes out better as “guys” in American or “lads” in British. Perhaps they needed to learn again that apart from Christ they can do nothing (15:5). The grammatical construction of the question implies that a negative answer is expected. Thus, “They answered him, ‘No.’”

What occurred next is reminiscent of a story line from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 5:1-11). Just as the creator of the cosmos had known the location of the fish in Luke’s Gospel, he, likewise, knew they were on the starboard side on this occasion. The catch was great, beyond the explanation of the natural course of events.

It is the Lord (21:7)

The beloved disciple (our writer John himself) was the first to identify the shadowy silhouette on the seashore – “It is the Lord.” Given the occurrence of the miraculous catch of fish, we should not be surprised that John had another one of his “aha moments” (see 20:8).

Always a man of action (see 20:6), Peter abandoned the boat and headed for the shore to see his Savior. Being stripped down for the day’s duties, Peter, most likely out of respect for the Lord, covered himself and then cast himself into the sea to swim ashore.

The actions of both Peter and John were indicative of what we have come to know about them – the beloved disciple exhibited quick insight, and Peter, quick action. Christ had come to see the disciples again and would always dwell in their hearts.

Having Christ dwell with us is akin to having a new person move into your household. If they’re just visiting, it is all rather easy; you simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners. But if someone moves in to stay, everything changes. At first you try to hold on to your familiar patterns and routines, and the new member may work hard to accommodate you and stay out of your way. But eventually they make their mark. Conversations change. Relationships realign. Household tasks increase and responsibilities shift. So it is when Christ moves into the hearts of Christians. This isn’t merely tweaking old patterns; everything changes. [He is here to stay.] (Karen Chakoian in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, homileticsonline.com)

Charcoal Fire (21:8-11)

In his customary style, John gives us some very specific details about the event. The length of Peter’s swim was about 100 yards, which is not very far for even an average swimmer. As they arrived on shore from either swimming (Peter) or sailing (the other six disciples), they noticed a ready-made charcoal fire cooking fish. We should note that the same rabbi who previously served by washing his disciples’ feet (13:1-17), now, as the risen Lord, continued to serve by providing a hot breakfast to hungry fishermen.

Note the description of the cooking source, a “charcoal fire.” This must certainly be an echo back to chapter 18 where Peter stood warming himself beside a “charcoal fire” (18:18). While the setting is the same, occurring around a charcoal fire, the two events could not be more different. At the first charcoal fire, Peter denied even knowing the Lord. But, around the warmth of the second fire, Peter affirmed that he loved his Lord. Additionally, around the first fire, Peter was warming himself at a fire prepared by the enemies of the Lord (18:18). On the second occasion, he warmed himself around a fire prepared by the resurrected Jesus! At the very place of his failure – a charcoal fire – Peter found restoration.

Though fish were already frying, Jesus indicated that he would like some of the fresh catch to complete the morning breakfast. As a testimony to his physical vigor, Peter himself drew the net full of fish to the shore – 153 fish in all!

When you think about the exact count of fish, 153, consider:

(1) John has a knack for giving us great detail, whether it be the number of yards Peter swam or the number of fish that were caught.

- (2) Counting the fish was quite necessary because the fishermen would have needed an exact count in order to divide the miraculous catch among themselves.
- (3) No fisherman ever forgets the details of his biggest catch!

The Third Time (21:12-14)

As Jesus invited the disciples to have breakfast, John notes that no one dared question the identity of their host – as they all knew well it was the living Lord. This might seem like an odd comment until we remember that there was something unusual, different, about Jesus' resurrection appearance. Remember, neither Mary Magdalene (20:14) nor the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) recognized Jesus following the resurrection. John indicates that this is “the third time” that Jesus had appeared to his disciples following the resurrection.

Restoration (21:15-17)

To understand the ending of John's Gospel, we must travel all the way back to chapter 13 where Peter bragged about being above the other disciples. As Jesus was telling his disciples that he was about to go to a place where they “cannot follow” (13:33), Peter rebuffed the Lord, asserting that he would go wherever the Lord goes, even if he had to lay down his life. Setting the record straight, Jesus prophesied, “Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times” (13:38). In chapter 18, moreover, the prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled, as Peter (gathered around a charcoal fire), indeed, thrice denied that he had any relationship with Jesus (18:12-27).

Interpreting our present passage in the context of Peter's previous distancing himself from the Lord, we understand that just as Peter had denied any relationship with Jesus three times, Jesus insisted that Peter be restored to his rightful relationship with him and the other disciples by this triple affirmation.

Was Jesus asking, (1) Do you love me more than these men love me? Or, (2) Do you love me more than you love these men? Or, finally, (3) Do you love me more than you love these things – the fishing business?

Of the three possibilities, the first seems most likely. Had Peter not, on earlier occasions, professed that his devotion to Christ exceeded that of the others in the apostolic band (Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29; John 13:37; 15:12f.)? Thus, Jesus was asking, “In light of all that has happened, Peter, do you still think that your devotion to me exceeds the devotion of the others?”

The further, implied question was along these lines: “Peter, do you love me, as a crucified and resurrected Messiah, or did you just love me for who you thought I was, a militant Messiah?”

The context indicates that Peter knew that the Lord himself was already aware of Peter's love (v. 15-16). In fact, in verse 17 we see that Peter was “grieved” because Jesus made him say, yet a third time, that he loved the Lord. “Grieved,” perhaps, because it reminded him of his three-time denial.

As a result of the triple affirmation of his love, Peter was commissioned to tend Jesus' sheep. Concerning Peter's care of the flock, the church, we must note:

- (1) The ministry is designated with verbs – tend, feed – not nouns like pastor or priest.
- (2) The sheep belong to Christ, not Peter. “Tend *my* sheep,” not *your*.

Follow Me (21:18-19)

Jesus, at last, showed Peter that he will, in fact, one day lay down his life for his Lord (13:37). The one who had previously denied, would now, having experienced the power of the resurrection, be willing to go to his grave for the truth of the gospel. Jesus informed Peter that when Peter was a young man, he was able to make his own choices, but, in his old age, Peter would glorify God through death (12:23; 13:31-32; 17:1). Of most importance are the words “you will stretch out your hands.” While the words may sound general, there is clear evidence that the “stretching forth of the hands” was held in the early church to refer to crucifixion. Most probably, by the time this Gospel was written, Peter had already glorified God with his martyrdom, likely in Rome under Emperor Nero. Clement of Rome (A.D. 96) mentions Peter’s martyrdom, but does not reveal what form it took (1 Clement 5:4). Tertullian (A.D. 212) affirms that when Peter was bound to the cross, he was girded by someone else. Later accounts even indicate that Peter may have requested to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was.

We should not miss Jesus’ second call to Peter to “follow Me” (for the first call, see 1:40-43). While Peter might not have understood the earlier call, he now knew that to journey behind Jesus was to go the way of the cross, the way of suffering.

What About This Man? (21:20-23)

Peter and the beloved disciple have both played a starring role in this Gospel, and it is only proper that we have a final word about the beloved disciple as well. With the starkest reply, Jesus simply told Peter it was none of his business concerning what was going to happen to John (the beloved disciple). One may wear the martyr’s crown (Peter), and the other may have a long life (the beloved disciple) – each played a different role in the advancement of the kingdom.

We Know (21:24-25)

We close with a reminder that we have not been told all that Jesus did because no such comprehensive collection is possible. With a dose of humility, we are reminded that there is much more to Jesus than we know, much more that we will learn about his kingdom – one day!

Conclusion

Though Peter had warmed himself around the charcoal fire of denial, he, no doubt, found greater warmth around the charcoal fire of restoration. As many times as he had denied even knowing Jesus, Peter, no less, professed his love for the Lord. Do you recognize that silhouette of the Savior standing on the shore? He is calling you to jump in and swim to grace. Do you love him?

Forgiveness is central to this dialogue between the disciple and his Lord, although the word itself is never used. Forgiveness is an innovative gesture: one that offers a hope for the future that we do not have to be defined by the sin of the past. Jesus makes this innovative gesture to Peter in order to free him from his cowardly denials, and He does this so that Peter will be able to feed and care for God’s sheep. Peter is not forgiven simply so that he can feel good about himself again, but so that he can serve the church with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. The

miracle of forgiveness certainly makes work for Peter, but it is work that makes his life worth living. (Theologian L. Gregory Jones; homileticsonline.com)

Just imagine where else Jesus could have been. Enjoying the fulness of the Father? Resting as near to the heart of God as one can get? Seated at the right hand where He belongs? He was the risen Lord, and, yet, He takes a seat on the beach and asks how things are going. That's how much He wants Peter to be restored. That's how much He wants you to come back to Him after you have been away.

Wait! I see His silhouette now and smell the charcoal fire. Time to follow Him all over again.