

John 21:1-25
(Psalm 23; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
“Do You Love Me? Feed My Sheep”

Introduction

John has ended his gospel with the story of Thomas, the disciple who gave the highest testimony to Jesus: Thomas bows before the risen Christ and says, “My Lord and my God!” John then tells us that the stories about Jesus that he has chosen to record are written with one goal in mind: so that we, like John and Thomas, and all the disciples, “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing may have life in his name” (20:31).

Why, then, this final chapter? Why tell an additional story? Why add a sort of postscript to the gospel? The key, I believe, is found in the final verses of chapter 21, which we will get to in our fourth and final point this morning. But first, I would invite you to enter this wonderful story – a story that had circulated orally within the early church and was treasured, although misunderstood. The disciples who had gathered around John now write down this story and append it to the gospel in order to clarify confusion and to relieve doubt.

Look with me at four aspects of this story that merit our attention.

Body

1. Note, first, where Jesus meets his disciples (21:1-8).

I used to read this text as a picture of the continuing instability of the disciples prior to Pentecost. Jesus had called the disciples to leave their nets and become fishers of men, and here they are returning to their nets and their old way of life. Simon says, “I’m going fishing,” and the others reply “We’ll go with you.” However, when I was in Hong Kong a few weeks ago, at breakfast with a friend, Chris Exline, Chris commented on this text, observing how wonderful it was that Peter went back to the place where Jesus had first revealed himself with absolute clarity through a miraculous catch of fish (you’ll find the story in Luke 5:1-11). Chris said that it was like someone going back to the place where he first fell in love, hoping again to recapture that moment and perhaps even meet again his beloved. And further, Chris said, isn’t it wonderful that Jesus also went back to the place where Peter had first understood who Jesus really is. This moment was so definitive in their relationship that both went back to capture it again in the light of all that had happened since. I would simply add that, just as it was at the beginning of their friendship the place where Jesus revealed himself to Peter, so now it

becomes the place where Jesus reveals Peter to himself, and recalls him to his true vocation.

It set me thinking of those times and places where, and means through which, the Lord has met me with power. Do I treasure those means, those times and places, and return to them over and over again to remember the grace and love that met me there in Christ and that might perhaps, by grace, meet me there again?

2. Note, secondly, how graciously Jesus restores Peter (21:15-19).

Jesus takes Peter for a walk away from the others (we know this from 21:20), so as not to embarrass him, and asks him a piercing question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Why does Jesus ask the question in this way? Because Peter had said to Jesus the night of his arrest that, even if all the rest were to flee from Jesus, he would never do so. In other words, he had claimed to love Jesus more than the rest of the disciples loved him. Now Peter answers, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me." Again Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Again Jesus replies, "Tend my sheep." A third time, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter is grieved and answers, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And a third time Jesus replies, "Feed my sheep."

Why does Jesus do this? After all they have been through, why does he put Peter through this? Because, Peter had denied him three times, and he is giving Peter the opportunity to confess him three times. Jesus has already forgiven Peter, already restored him. He has commissioned him and breathed his Spirit upon him. But Peter has not yet forgiven himself. He is still churning in Jesus' presence, overwhelmed with his own repeated denials of Jesus. So Jesus recreates the scene and gives him the opportunity to now confess rather than deny him. And with each confession, Jesus commissions him again. Take up my ministry, he says, I am the good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

And lest Peter fear that he will once again fall away and deny him, Jesus tells him that one day he will die a martyr's death: "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show him by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, 'Follow me'" (21:18&19).

3. Note, also, how clearly Jesus describes the rhythm of our life (21:15-17).

In these words, Jesus expresses with clarity and simplicity the rhythm that should make the lives of his disciples: worship and mission. "Do you love me? Then feed me sheep." This is what it looks like to follow Jesus. We make it so

very complicated, but it is the simplest, most compelling expression of human life lived in fellowship with God through Christ. Love the Lord, love his people, serve the world. “Do you love me? Then feed my sheep.”

4. Note, finally, that Jesus only tells us our own story (21:20-25).

Peter turns and sees John following, and asks Jesus, “What about him? What is going to happen to him? Will he die a martyr’s death as well?” And Jesus replies, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”

Apparently, John has now died, and it has caused a crisis in faith on the part of some, because they have been told this story recorded in chapter 21, and have misunderstood what Jesus said to Peter about John. So the community that had gathered around John, who knew him and who could testify to his integrity, now tell this story as John had told it to them, so that others might understand what Jesus actually said – not that John would not die before the Messiah returned, but rather that it was none of Peter’s business what happened to John.

This is an important point for us to take to heart: we get so concerned about other people: What about him? Why does everything seem to come to him so easily? What about her, why does she seem so favored by life? Why does she get that job? Why does he get to live there? Why are they healthy and I’m sick? Why are they prospering when I’m struggling? And Jesus’ answer is, always “What is that to you? You follow me!”

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis has two of his character each ask the Christ figure, Aslan the Lion, what is in store for the other. Aslan replies, “Child, I am telling you your story. ... I tell no one any story but his own.”

Conclusion

Where are you in your story of God’s grace? Have you yet heard him call your name? Do you go back to those places where he has met you in the past, seeking again a life transforming, refreshing experience of his presence and grace? Do you make bold professions of faith and love? Then to you he says, “Follow me. I entrust to you the ministry the Father entrusted to me. As I loved the Father, you are to love me. As I came to do the Father’s will, you are to do my will. As the Father sent me, I send you. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” This is, quite simply, what it means to believe in Jesus and have life in his name.

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