

John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon 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. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He 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. That 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. But 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. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So 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. Jesus 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When 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." A 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." He 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. Very 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." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." (544)

You are not the worst thing you've ever done.

Like with Peter here. He'd done more than a few embarrassing things, a couple even downright wrong things. He often, along with the other disciples, failed to understand, when Jesus was talking, what exactly he was talking about, what exactly was his meaning. He, that one time, when Jesus was walking on the water, himself went out of the boat, to walk out to meet him. But the sea became stormy, and it made him nervous so all of a sudden he began to sink.

Then there was when Jesus was being arrested and someone struck out with a sword to make it stop, cutting off the ear of the one attempting the arrest. Some say this was Peter who did

it, which is hard to believe because why would Peter have a sword? He was a fisherman. He was a disciple, sent out with no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic, and certainly no sword. Whatever. If he'd done it, he was acting out his response when Jesus told him, told them all, what was to happen to him—that he must undergo great suffering, that he would be handed over to the elders and arrested and put to death, but on the third day he would rise again, to which Peter replied a rebuke: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!”

Jesus rebuked him right back: “Get behind me, Satan,” he said, calling Peter Satan, Jesus calling Peter an adversarial spirit: Satan, *ha-satan*, the adversary. As if Peter was setting a path very much against the path Jesus was meant to walk, sword or no sword.

Because if Jesus were to protect himself, to defend himself, if he were to make it so he didn't suffer the worst of this world, which he certainly could do, as the Son of God and all, then he wouldn't be serving as the Son of God. If he secured his own safety, which he certainly could do, then he wouldn't be serving as the saving Christ in the world.

That's the paradox—what he certainly has the power to do is exactly what he must not do.

Think of that derision that came while he was hanging from the cross: “He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Son of God.” The thing is, to be the Son of God means not to save yourself but rather to save others, which can be done only by putting others first—getting everyone else out of the burning building before you think of yourself, throwing yourself in front of that oncoming bullet in order for it not to take out the one in its path.

But it's worse than that, because these are the way of heroes, these are the ways of glory. It's why Tim O'Brien claims we shouldn't believe any such war stories as these. Tim O'Brien, the writer who also served in Vietnam, and whose literature upon returning cast a deeply skeptical eye on any war story that makes you feel good, any war story that suggests there's glory to be found in war and that heroes are made in war. All this only justified the decisions of the war-makers, who were almost never the ones put as boots on the ground and soldiers in harm's way.

If you hear a war story about a grenade let to go off amidst a squadron but one of the members throws himself on the grenade this saving everyone else, don't believe it. And if you hear the same story but the grenade thrown is amidst a room full of school children, children of the enemy, but someone on the opposite side throws himself on the grenade, thus saving all the enemy school children, very much don't believe it. That's a war story that tells a lie. Even if it happened (which it likely didn't), even if it mostly happened (which it only slightly less likely didn't), if it makes you feel good—good about the human spirit, good about any one person's particular

capacity for bravery or generosity or courage or magnanimity, good about the creation of a new hero or the burnishing of human glory—then it’s an untrue war story because war is evil and should not be imagined as a garden for potential good. Anyone who inches you in that direction is lying to you.

But to be crucified doesn’t even court this madness. There’s nothing glorious about being crucified. There’s nothing glorious about standing there while the religious authorities accuse you, there’s nothing golden in going along while the imperial authorities lead you away. This isn’t the hero’s path. This is the simp’s. Being led to your own slaughter: please! This is the shame that still hangs amidst some of the Jewish community, how easily they were led into the train cars of the Third Reich, how compliant they were while stripped and shaved. “Never again,” is what some would swear, and less to mean “never again should we do genocide,” and more to mean, “never again will we be anything other than aggressively defended,” and who can blame them? What good came of that horror-show that we call the Holocaust, but which some would rather call the Shoah, for it being not a holy offering to the Lord, as the word holocaust means, but for it being an utterly meaningless catastrophe, as the word *Shoah* in Hebrew means? What good came of that? What of atonement or redemption?

And yet this is what we confess our Lord to have done, to have walked into that train car, to have held out his arms for the hammer and nails; and this is the central reason *why* we confess him as Lord—for something good did come of the crucifixion, something of redemption did arise. That’s what we confess. That’s what we think. Got it? Can we blame Peter for getting this so wrong? And can we blame Peter for not wanting to follow in that way? “I do not know the man,” Peter is remembered to have said.

Of course, in the Gospel of John it’s remembered a little differently.

It happened in the courtyard of the High Priest. Here some slaves and some members of the police had made a charcoal fire and were warming themselves while Jesus was in with Caiaphas being questioned. Peter, for his part, was outside the gate where a woman stood guard until she let him in, asking him, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?”

“I am not,” Peter said.

A little bit later, some among the slaves and the police officers still at the fire asked Peter this same thing, Peter who was now with them warming himself by the charcoal fire: “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?”

“I am not,” Peter said again, just as Jesus had known he would do.

Careful readers of the Gospel of John will understand this not only as Peter denying Jesus, which would have been significant enough of course. It would happen in fact twice before the cock crowed, a thing Peter would deny would happen, denying his denial because, well, it can be hard truly to accept yourself, hard truly to know yourself, what you're capable of, what you're not capable of.

Peter was sure he'd be faithful.

Yes, in its plain sense, this statement on Peter's part is significant enough. But the Gospel of John wants us to understand it as a statement even more profound. Consider: this gospel is one in which Jesus speaks often of himself in terms of "I Am." He says, "I am the true vine." He says, "I am the good shepherd." He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," all of which he says not so much as a statement about himself as an autonomous individual or a singular personality in the world, but as a means to recall the Being of God and to place himself in relation to Being that is God.

"I Am" is how God named God-self when first asked so long ago, Moses at the burning bush asking, "Whom shall I say sent me? Who are you? What is your name?"

This is an impertinent question, by the way, impertinent if ever there was one, for to know the name of God is to have power in relation to that God.

Think about it, to know someone's name is to have power in relation to that one. You hear your name, and you can't help but to react. So, someone knowing your name grants that person a certain power in your regard.

All the more so in knowing God's name: this is to have power in God's regard, the power to invoke that God, to get God's attention. Moreover, it's to have the power to exert in God's name. When Moses knew God's name it gave him power and authority to approach Pharaoh, indeed power and authority even to tell Pharaoh what to do: "Let my people go."

When Jesus speaks of himself as "I Am," he's saying something not so much about himself but about himself as one in such intimate relationship with God, God abiding in him as he abides in God. And his being so connected, indeed so at one, with God as Being, God as "I Am," suggests something that might be true about us as well. We also might be in such close relationship with I Am, in such intimate mutual indwelling with God as Being I Am. We might know ourselves truly and deeply: "I Am," by virtue of which we have power to withstand in the world amidst all sorts of travails, power to be faithful and even to love and manifest the reign of God and stand for the truth in the world—to do such things even when the world will point its sword at us, will come

at us with cynicism (“Why bother?”) or with menace (“You’d better not.”) or with punishment. Yes, we also might be in such close relationship with I Am that we might know our own being and know it moreover in intimate relationship with all that is Being.

Or not. As Peter here: “I am not.”

Afraid, alone, ashamed: I am not.

Three times he would deny him, Peter denying Jesus; three times also he would deny himself, “I am not.” Three times according to all four gospel narratives, a consensus among the four that is rare indeed. Few indeed are the stories that all four narratives remember and with all the finer points basically alike. Three times, by which Peter would save himself from deadly trouble.

For a time.

Eventually, though, his denial would crumble, would come to a firmer ground of faithfulness.

This is the third and final time Jesus would appear resurrected to the disciples according to the Gospel of John. With this, Jesus would depart for good. With this, life would return to normal for the disciples, except in the way that everything would change. With this Jesus needs someone else to take up the task. “Feed my sheep,” Jesus would tell Peter, three times he would tell him, and three times Peter said he would.

This final chapter of the Gospel of John feels like an “oh and one more thing” moment, as if Jesus was himself having a hard time going. The 20th chapter had concluded so well. “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,” the 20th chapter so concludes, “many other signs that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

But then comes the 21st chapter: “After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way,” which then goes on to sketch a scene filled with weirdly specific details, Peter putting clothes *on* before jumping into the water, Jesus insisting they have some breakfast, their catch numbering 153 fish, which begs the question, why 153, has for hundreds of years begged the question, why 153, spurring thousands of hours of preached meaning-making over the enduring mystery of the number 153, except that there’s little mystery in the number 153. It’s just a fact, significant not for its theological import but because of its being a matter of fact.

Significant also for it being a lot, a lot of fish caught when just prior there'd been none.

The abundance is what tips the disciples off. They'd been unsure as to who it was on the beach beside the charcoal fire, which fire was reminiscent of the one on that dreadful night that now seems like a lifetime ago. They'd been unsure because Jesus resurrected had showed up already, a shock they'd already absorbed a bit. But according to John he'd only shown up in Jerusalem, in the garden of his tomb, showing himself to Mary, and then on two evenings in the upper room where the disciples were staying. Here, back in Galilee where the disciples had resumed their lives as if these last three years hadn't even happened ("I'm going fishing."), the return to what's ordinary perhaps obscured their vision.

...until the abundant catch, which recalled the abundance of wine at Cana, the first sign, and the abundance of food for the whole crowd on the mountain, the fourth sign. "It is the Lord," the one disciple said, which had Peter jump into the water. He would swim to the shore. Even with his tunic on, it would be faster than the boat now struggling with the weight of the catch.

Together they would eat, which Jesus would then command Peter to do once he was gone, not only to eat in Jesus' name but also to feed others in Jesus' name. "Feed my sheep," three times commanded, and three times Peter agreed. This was an undoing of the three times denying just a short couple weeks ago, a making it right. Because you are not the worst thing you've ever done.

"Tend my sheep," which Peter would do, and which would be the end of him, just as he had feared. He would be led to where he would not want to go, where he indeed often resisted to go—which is fine to resist because suffering and death are not themselves a good, suffering and death are not themselves redemptive. There's no need for you to participate in your own destruction: the need is rather not to betray what's true, what's love, in order to avoid any suffering. The need is not to participate in your own suffering: the need is to be willing to suffer when what's on the line is the truth.

Peter would die the sort of death he'd wanted not to die. He would suffer it because of what he insisted on doing in the world, that is, bringing good news to the poor and hope for the oppressed, bringing belovedness to the downtrodden and a fullness of being to any who'd been set in society not to matter.

Isn't it funny what the powers find threatening: the truth? Isn't it pathetic what strongmen so thoroughly fear, the truly human, the truly alive, grounded in true life, true Being.

You are not the worst thing you've ever done. There's time to do better, and the world as it is will give us many a chance, to do what's right, to make of things a little less wrong. Take heart. Do not fear.

Thanks be to God.