

Sunday, May 4, 2025
Sermon: "Empty Net Syndrom"
John 21:1-17 CEB

Where we are going in today's sermon: "Catching anything?" It's the question anglers love to answer when they've just landed the big one - but dread when they're not having any luck.

It had been a rough night for the party of seasoned fishermen. "That night they caught nothing," says John (v. 3). Nothing. Not a single fish.

It had to be especially humiliating for Peter, their leader. He was a professional fisherman - or had been, before he began following Jesus up and down the land. The repetitive motion of throwing a small, weighted net off one side of the boat and slowly pulling it in, hand over hand, was second nature to him. He could have done it in his sleep.

You can bet Peter knew all the prime fishing spots, too. The little fishing villages that hug the shore of the Sea of Galilee were his home turf. But this night? Nada.

It's a bit of a mystery why Peter and the others decided to go back to fishing after they'd seen - and even touched - the risen Christ. In fairness to them, Jesus isn't so easy to follow in these post-resurrection days. He's with them one moment and gone the next. He's a hard man to pin down, this risen Savior!

Maybe it's not so strange that they would go back to fishing. It's what they knew. People didn't frequently change careers in biblical times, the way we do today. The very concept of a career as something you choose was foreign to them. If you were a man and had a trade, like fishing, it was likely because your father had done the very same thing. There were no banks to offer start-up financing for the purchase of boats and nets. You inherited the tools of the trade from your father. And he'd very likely inherited them from his old man.

James and John are among those fishing with Peter that day. All three have something in common: the experience of being called by Jesus. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people," Jesus said (Matthew 4:19). They got up and followed without a word, surprising even themselves.

But here they are again, back in the fishing boat. Time to get back to the nets.

Except the fish aren't cooperating. But wait ... there's a guy standing on the shoreline a hundred yards away who seems to have an idea what to do.

They can barely see him in the early-morning gloom, as he cups his hands to his mouth and shouts out the nosy question those who love fishing must patiently endure: "Catching anything?"

That's not exactly what he says. "You don't have any fish, do you?" is more like it. (And how does he know?)

Glumly they return their answer: "Not a one."

Is his question a sarcastic dig or cutting criticism? It's probably more sympathetic than that, because when he shouts back something about casting their net on the other side of the boat, they obediently do what he says.

Bingo. In one cast, they've just caught a whole night's haul! The net's so full, groaning with fish, they can't even haul it in. The best they can do is tie it off, put their oars in the water and pull towards shore, dragging the bulging net behind them.

Their nets had been empty. Surely, you've experienced times like that - times when what you've always done doesn't seem to be working anymore. It's times like those when you find yourself doing what's supposed to be the definition of insanity: repeating the same action over and over, expecting a different result.

But the thing about fishing is that sometimes repetition works! Sometimes a little persistence is all you need. It's one of the reasons why recreational fishing with a rod and reel is so addictive - why anglers are so eager to keep repeating those motions. Just one more cast. Maybe it will be different ...

Is something in your life right now causing your nets to come back empty? Is it something to do with work? Or maybe your retirement hasn't turned out quite the way you'd imagined? Maybe you're still young and in school, and you hate your place in a pecking order that you just can't seem to bust out of. Or maybe it's a close family relationship - even a marriage - that has grown cold over time, and you don't know how to breathe life back into it. Maybe it's your Christian faith itself. It reliably brought you strength and comfort in the past. But now you're not so sure. The net comes back empty no matter how many times you cast it.

Sometimes Christians get all caught up in the works-righteousness thing - the conviction that we have to save ourselves through hard work and persistence. That's exactly what's going on in this Bible story as Peter and the others just keep casting their nets again and again.

Do you know the most beautiful part of this story? Those guys are just fishing. They aren't looking for Jesus. But they don't have to. He finds them!

When Peter finally realizes it is Jesus standing on the shore, he does the strangest thing. Verse 7 says, "When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea." There's something odd about that. Who puts clothes on to go swimming?

But that's not really what's going on here. The Greek is hard to translate into English. A literal translation, which is what we have here, sounds bizarre. But

most biblical scholars agree that, rather than saying Peter is out there fishing in the buff - something no observant Jew would ever do - the Greek really means that he's stripped down to a loincloth. Very practical garb for someone handling soaking wet nets.

When Peter realizes it's Jesus standing there on the sand, he grabs his tunic, pulls it on and jumps into the water. That's what you'd do if you wanted to get to shore with your clothes but had to keep your limbs free to swim.

Of course, Peter could have just jumped into the water wearing only his loincloth, but the fact that he takes his tunic with him says something important about his state of mind. Now that he has seen Jesus, Peter knows he's not going back to the fishing boat, ever again. He's done with that. He's leaving his old fisherman-self behind and throwing in his lot with his Lord and master once again - except for that fishing-for-people thing, of course.

It couldn't have been the easiest thing to do because Peter and Jesus had some unfinished business. They didn't part on the best of terms. But Jesus takes care of it. He makes it right.

John takes pains to tell us that Jesus has a little cookfire going there on the beach, and he's grilling a few fish. "Come and have breakfast!" he says to them, a greeting as ordinary as it is inviting.

The whole scene calls to mind something that happened earlier in John's gospel. It happened in a spot not far from this very stretch of beach. You know the story: A hungry crowd gathered alongside the Sea of Galilee, and there was no way the disciples had enough food to feed them. They only had five tiny loaves of bread and two smoked fish. But Jesus told them to start dividing up the food, and - surprise - it was enough to feed a multitude!

Same spot, or very nearly so. Same menu: bread and fish. Whenever Jesus Christ starts handing out food - whether by the lakeshore or at the Lord's table - he does so in mind-boggling abundance!

John provides us with a little detail that may seem incidental but is central to what is about to happen. John tells us it is a charcoal fire.

The Greek word he uses for "charcoal fire" occurs only one other time in the whole New Testament. Can you guess where that is? (If you can, you win today's Bible trivia prize.)

It occurs in that scene when Peter denied Jesus the first time. It was a dark, bone-chilling night. He was stumbling through the streets and alleyways of the unforgiving city when he came upon a charcoal fire in a brazier. Several people were standing around it in the gloom, warming their hands over the flame. Peter stepped up and joined them. As he was rubbing his hands together - rather like Pilate did, when he was washing his hands of Jesus - one of his newfound companions said, "Hey, I know you. You were with the Galilean rabbi they just arrested!" And Peter said, "No, I wasn't. It was someone else."

Twice more he said that. Two more acts of betrayal before the cock crowed.

As Peter stands there on the beach, looking into the eyes of his Lord and Master, the pungent aroma of burning charcoal floods his nostrils. The human sense of smell is a powerfully evocative thing. For Peter, it's the scent of betrayal.

Such are the memories that occur to him during that breakfast on the beach. He is overjoyed to be with Jesus once again, but his joy is not complete because of that nagging memory, wafting its way on swirling ribbons of charcoal smoke.

But Jesus has it covered. At some point toward the end of the meal, Jesus' eyes meet his. Then the risen Lord says the most extraordinary thing: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs."

The two of them repeat the exchange two more times. It is ordinary conversation, but it is also a sort of liturgy.

Is it an accident that the threefold formula corresponds to the three times Peter denied him? No. Here, with infinite patience and grace, the Lord is walking Peter back through his greatest regrets and most heart-searing memories.

What's happening here is the healing of memories, which is among the most profound and life-changing healings of all. The heal-my-lambs liturgy gives Peter the chance to live that episode of his life over - to make it right this time. What is it that's making your nets come up empty? There's a real possibility of a hole in your net, a ragged tear in the slender, knotted cords. Because of that flaw, your net can hold no fish. What you have to do, by God's grace, is stop trying to fish and go mend your net. You have to sew up that hole. Only it's not something you can do yourself. You need someone else to do it for you. You need an expert fisherman, a true mender of nets.

What you need is Jesus Christ. He's the One who will listen, with infinite patience, to your tale of shame and regret. He's the One who will take your pain upon himself. He's the One who - by his amazing grace - will walk you back through what you've done (or failed to do) and make you whole again.

"Do you love me more than these?" he wants to know. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Then, go do the thing I've called you to do. Feed my sheep." Alleluia, Amen.