

WANDERING HEART: FIGURING OUT FAITH WITH PETER¹

Psalm 25:1-10 ~ Luke 5:1-11

Jesus sought me

First Sunday in Lent ~ February 18, 2024

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Introduction to Scripture

Remember Peter up on the mountain of Transfiguration last week? Peter was the first one (the only one) of the three disciples to speak, when Jesus was transfigured before them and out of nowhere the avatars of Moses and Elijah appeared, talking with Jesus. Peter was the one to spit ball his big idea about building booths. He was ready to get right on it-that very day he knew Menards was having its 11% rebate sale where he could get a great deal on supplies to build three booths, one each of them: for Elijah and Moses and Jesus.

In today's gospel reading, we are taking a giant leap back in time to the *beginning* of Jesus' relationship with Simon Peter. This is where we begin our Lenten sermon series: *Wandering Heart: Figuring out Faith with Peter*. We are back in the before time, back before Jesus found him. Before Jesus renamed Simon to be Peter. It all starts, according to Luke, after a really bad night. The worst night shift for a fisherman whose livelihood depends on catching fish. Simon was not an "I'd Rather Be Fishing" on his rear bumper kind of fisher. Nor was he like any of you frustrated recreational Wisconsin ice fishers missing the usual winter fun of this sport. For Simon, James and John, no fish, meant zero paycheck, no income, no food for them and their families I'm sure this wasn't the first time they'd had a zero-catch night. "It is what it is." (No, we didn't invent that phrase here in the 21st century.)

But then along comes this strange healer Rabbi who commandeers Simon's boat as a platform from which to teach a bunch of people crowded on the shore. Where did they come from? What is going on here? Surely Simon groaned inwardly, "Oh God: not this. Not now. I'm exhausted. Can't I just finish washing the nets and call it a night?" Not that morning. Hey, you, wandering hearts, no matter what kind of night you just had, put down your phones. Here it comes: Episode 1: *Jesus sought me*. Luke 5:1-11.

Sermon

In the opening scene of the song "A Winter's Ball" Alexander Hamilton meets his future and unlikely bride, Eliza, for the first time, in the musical, Hamilton. Eliza's big sister, Angelica, grabs Hamilton and he asks her: "Where are you taking me?" Angelica answers: "I'm about to change your life." To which Hamilton replies: "Then by all means, lead the way." A wonderfully in character response for Alexander Hamilton. If you think about it Hamilton and Simon Peter share some similar personality traits. Certainly, they both led with their mouths. They were both hyperactive big talkers. And both were big idea people. But *unlike* Hamilton, Peter was not so ready to have his life be changed.

Did you notice how twice in today's call story, Peter says "no" before he gets to "yes." First to Jesus' suggestion to "Put out into the deep water and let down you nets for a catch." To which he essentially said, "No, Jesus, not the deep water, that will so not work. We know what we are doing here, we've already tried everything." Perhaps there was a look, an exchange of glances not recorded, that got him from "no way" to "Okay, just to humor you we will give it a try. We have nothing to lose. If you say so, (*insert eye rollage*) I will give it a go."

The second "no" came *after* the amazing catch, again Peter's first instinct is a big NO!! "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" At first glance, this may seem a strange remark to make in response to this miraculous catch of fish. A turn of fortune that would reverse his economic situation immediately. And yet, if you think a little more about it, you realize that Peter's gut instinct is right on. This is actually a dangerous moment for him. If he goes with Jesus, he knows his life will change, forever. And unlike Alexander Hamilton, but more like most of us: that was scary. Peter's first instinct was to run! Yes, Peter was appropriately fearful about being changed forever. And Jesus, acknowledging his terror said to him, "Fear not."

Jesus knew Peter's wandering heart would get there. Was Jesus messing with Peter? Maybe a little. He was definitely speaking Peter's core language of fish, boats, water and nets—but changing it up, telling it slant. You could say Jesus *transfigured* the empty nets with a crazy number of fish: too much, too fast. Boats were sinking, nets were breaking, Peter could see his whole world shifting right there in his rickety old boat.

Our Bible is full of stories like this. Think of Jonah who ran as fast as he could in the *opposite* direction when God told him to go to Ninevah. God messed with Jonah: three days inside a big fish can definitely change one's perspective. Indeed, Jonah then did go to Ninevah as God had called him to do. And yet still, Jonah was Jonah--complaining and whining at every turn. Even *after* his smashing success. You have to love how raw and real and relatable Jonah and Peter come off in these stories.

I want to tell you about someone *else* God messed with a young man named Robert Robinson. One winter night in 1754, God changed his life. And it was not at a Winter's Ball. Robert Robinson wrote the words to the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." We sang it this morning. And we will continue to sing parts of this wonderful hymn throughout Lent. The sermon titles for this series are phrases from this amazing hymn.

Here's a bit of Robinson's backstory: at only eight years old, Robert's life changed dramatically because his father died, leaving his mom and other siblings destitute. So, when Robert turned 12, his mom sent him away from their little village of Swaffham, Norfolk, in England to apprentice as a barber in the big city of London. Before long (not being interested at all in barbering or in books) he found a gang of friends from whom he picked up other skills that highly interested him: Shoplifting from shopkeepers and excessive drinking.

As the story goes, one winter night in 1754, Robert and his band of friends, bored with their usual shenanigans, decided it would be great fun to heckle the preacher at one of the

many open-air evangelistic meetings being held in London at that time. Although Robert came there to stir up some trouble, the speaker giving the message that cold night was George Whitefield, a dynamic Methodist preacher who warned his listeners of the “wrath to come” for those who ignored God’s all upon their lives. Only God knows what chord was struck in Robert’s wandering and rebellious heart, but he decided to accept the preacher’s call to believe in Christ that very night.

In a few years Robert became a Methodist pastor, like George Whitefield. As it turned out, even though he had hated school and been bored by it, he actually had a very sharp mind and came to write inspiring sermons and theological papers. Robinson apparently hated creeds and confessions and in time moved over to being a Baptist pastor. Although his faith in Christ changed his life forever, at the same time Robert continued to struggle with mental health and severe depression, throughout his life. I love the way his hymn-poem speaks to the ongoing struggle of faith so honestly.ⁱⁱ

Yes, Robert believed in Christ’s call to him, and still struggled mightily. So too, did Simon Peter, as we will explore more fully in this Lenten sermon series. Peter and Robert were changed forever in some ways: their sense of belonging and purpose in life. And still, their personality quirks remained. We are who we are. God knows us. And leverages God’s light and purpose and power in us as we are. Even as our beliefs grow and evolve and deepen. Like two dogs and a cat I heard about from one of our members earlier this week. Yes, this is a joke I am about to tell you about belief and faith. And it goes like this:

A German Shepherd, a Doberman and a cat died. In heaven, all three faced God who wanted to know what they believed in. The German Shepherd said, “I believe in discipline, training and loyalty to my master.” “Good!” said God. “Sit at my right side.” “Doberman, what do you believe in?” asked God. The Doberman answered, “I believe in love, care, and protection of my master,” “Aha” said God. “You may sit at my left.” Then God looked at the cat and asked, “And what do you believe in?” The cat replied, “I believe you’re sitting in my seat.”

Obviously, the cat had it all figured out. Most of us don’t. But we would like to figure out our faith a little better: What we believe, in whom we believe, and what difference it makes. As we figure out faith with Peter this Lent, let’s keep in mind that clarity on our faith journey is not found entirely by thinking. Figuring it out with just our brains is not the whole story. Have you noticed how the more we think about something again and again we generally don’t arrive at real wisdom, but instead we easily tire ourselves out and get even more confused and anxious. I know I do. It seems like as we age this tendency to “overthink” gets worse, not better. I gave my husband a t-shirt for Christmas that said, “Give me a minute while I over think this.”

I’m learning right now from the author, Kaira Jewel Lingo, a Dharma teacher who offers a deep wisdom alternative for trying to figure out the future in our heads. I offer this to you today, as we begin this journey of “figuring out faith with Peter.” Whether you are feeling overwhelmed with a personal change or by the changes in our culture and society, she can help us learn to surrender to the unknown in our own lives. Like Peter, like Robert Robinson, this is essential not

only for us as individuals but also for our collective learning. To help us move through this time of faster and faster change, disruption, and breakdown.ⁱⁱⁱ What question or challenge is on your wandering heart and mind right now? I invite you to enter into her brief, guided meditation, (selected portions) "Resting Back and Trusting the Unknown" to end this sermon.

To begin the practice, find a comfortable position sitting in your pew. Connect with your body and how it's making contact with the chair. Allow yourself to rest back in some way and really feel the support of whatever is holding you... Every time you breathe out, let your body rest even more into the support of the Earth.

Allow your face to soften, releasing the forehead, the muscles around the eyes, the jaw... Let the tongue rest in the mouth... Be aware of the shoulders and as you breathe out, let the shoulders soften... Feel your whole body now as you inhale and exhale, allowing the whole body to soften and release its weight even more onto the Earth...

Now bring to mind some question or challenge you may have right now... notice how you feel about it, and the pull that may be there to resolve it ... without trying to figure out an answer or a solution, see this question or challenge as a seed you are entrusting to the soil of your mind, down in its depths ... just allow it to lie there, peacefully, quietly... let yourself rest back into the unknown, inviting your body just slightly, actually lean back a tiny bit... let yourself reconnect with the feeling of being held by the Earth ... you can rest on the Earth, just as this question can rest in the depths of your being ... while it may be scary not to know, there is also infinite possibility here ... take a few deep breath ... feel your body, settling, present ... and give the seed permission to take the time it needs to ripen into an answer... trust your own consciousness to show you the way then the time is right... Offer this breath prayer: (at least 3 times)

Breathing in, "The Christ is in me"

Breathing out, "Fear not"

Behold, Beloved Community: the kingdom of God is with you. Whatever change you may be facing: You can do this. Amen.

ⁱ Sanctified Art LLC, Sanctifiedart.org created this Lenten Theme, and sermon titles.

ⁱⁱ Pamela J. Kennedy, *Hymns of Praise* (Ideal Publications: A Division of Guidepost, Nashville, TN, 2001), pp. 10-11. I have taken this backstory of Robert Robinson from her chapter on him and this hymn.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaira Jewel Lingo, *We Were Made for These Times: Ten Lessons on Moving through Change, Loss, and Disruption*, (Parallax Press: Berkeley CA, 2021) pp. 22-25. This idea and the ending meditation are found in these pages of this wonderful book.