

## I DREAM OF JESUS

### *Sermon for Easter 3C--Jn 21:1-19*

LPC, 4/14/13

Welcome to the third Sunday of Easter and the third appearance of Jesus after his resurrection, according to the Gospel of John. This sequence has a decidedly dream-like quality: not dream-like in the sense of being misty about the details, but dream-like because there are, in fact, many precise details that bring together disparate and strange elements from previous experiences.

It is strange that after something as extraordinary as the appearance of Jesus alive after his death, the disciples are going fishing as if Jesus had never even come into their lives.

I have no way of knowing if it's unusual to fish all night in the Sea of Galilee without catching anything, but it definitely seems strange that merely letting down the nets on the other side of the boat should cause them to then teem with fish.

Another strange thing: Why should Peter dress to jump into the water? Presumably the usual thing would be work at least partially clothed, and strip to go swimming.

Don't these seem like elements of a dream? Doesn't this story make sense if you could imagine Peter narrating and beginning by saying, "I dreamed I was fishing with my brothers just like we used to do before Jesus came to us. We caught nothing all night until a stranger onshore told us to fish on the other side of the boat, and when we did, the net filled to bursting! Then John or somebody said it was the Lord on the shore! So I looked and sure enough it sure looked like him. I was so excited I put on my cloak before jumping in the water to swim to him ..." and so on.

One of the most dream-like qualities of what comes next is the way one of Peter's most troubling memories pops up in a different guise. Remember that the night Jesus was arrested Peter was questioned three times about whether he knew Jesus, and three times Peter lied to save his own skin. Here he is being questioned threefold again, only this time the questioner is Jesus himself. And the question is no longer "Do you know him?" but "Do you love him?" Given a second chance to acquit himself well, Peter this time gives the "right" answer. But for some reason Jesus does not seem satisfied.

I hope no one has been offended by my comparison of a part of Holy Scripture to a dream. I do not mean to imply that Holy Scripture is untrue. Indeed, dreams can be in some ways truer than real life, because they reveal the inner workings of the soul unencumbered by the machinations of the conscious mind. Plus, Holy Scripture itself tells of God communicating with human beings through dreams.

Of course, not all dreams are messages from God. Most dreams, in fact, are products of pure imagination. But when dreams support and magnify what we know about God from Holy Scripture, they at least warrant special attention.

Whether this story from John is a factual report or some sort of vision, the threefold questioning of Peter by Jesus reveals a profound truth about Jesus.

Let's start with Jesus' first question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" First, the use of the patronymic "son of John" suggests the formal questioning of some kind of ritual or legal proceeding. This is a signal to Simon that he is to consider the question carefully and answer with absolute truth. The implication is that God is watching.

Second, Jesus throws in that comparative, "more than these." More than these *what*? Is Jesus asking do you love me more than the others love me or is he asking do you love me more than you love the others?

In either case, it seems at first blush that Jesus is looking for an affirmative answer from Peter, which Peter dutifully provides. But if Jesus is looking for the answer Peter gives, why is Jesus not satisfied? Instead Jesus says, "Feed my lambs," and asks again, "Do you love me?" Peter repeats his affirmative answer and Jesus is still not satisfied. He says, "Tend my sheep" and asks a third time. No wonder Peter is hurt and frustrated. But Jesus once more refers to caring for sheep.

What if Jesus does not want Peter to love Jesus more that he loves his fellow human beings? What if Jesus' apparent dissatisfaction with Peter's affirmative answer means that he wants Peter to love others as much as Peter loves Jesus?

From what we know of Jesus in the rest of scripture, I suspect this is exactly what is going on here. Jesus is equating the love of himself with serving others. In other words, to say that you love Jesus without tending and feeding Jesus' beloved is meaningless. Love of Jesus means tending and feeding Jesus' people.

It's interesting that Jesus uses both the words "lambs" and "sheep" to refer to his flock. Lambs, baby sheep, are especially vulnerable creatures. To love Jesus is to feed and support the weakest among us. On the other hand, sheep, though full-grown animals, are headstrong, often silly, and, well, sheep-like, prone to following each other into disaster. Therefore to love Jesus is to tend and feed those among use with unattractive characteristics. After all, we are all sheep. We are all headstrong, occasionally silly, and sheep-like. We have to help each other. If we want to love Jesus that is.

As Jesus next says to Peter, that may land us where we do not wish to go. But that is exactly what loving Jesus means.

Still, our own loving Shepherd has not left us. We can still follow him. As long as we love, tend and feed as he has done. And along the way, we can be assured that we will continue to be loved, tended and fed.