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John 21:1-23  
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### Jesus Re-commissions Peter

There is something about the smell of incense that takes me all the way back to the earliest days of my faith. Maybe it's serving as an altar boy in the Roman Catholic Church... those late nights, the rhythm of the liturgy, the quiet awe of midnight mass. Or maybe it's something deeper than nostalgia.

The French philosopher Marcel Proust once wrote about how a simple smell or taste can unlock entire worlds of memory. For him, it was a madeleine cookie dipped in tea. For me, it's incense. One whiff, and suddenly I'm not just remembering—I'm there. I can see it, hear it, feel it. And more than anything, I'm reminded: God has been with me the whole time. Through the seasons when I followed closely... and the seasons when I didn't.

And that's exactly where our story today meets us.

This final chapter of John's Gospel takes place by the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are there, back where it all began. And if you listen closely, you can almost step into the scene...

It's early morning. The air is cool. You can smell the saltwater. Gulls are making their usual racket. The nets are rough in your hands. And honestly? There's a little frustration in the air too—because they've been fishing all night... and caught absolutely nothing.

Join me this morning as we read from John 21:1-23 and we listen for the Word of the Lord.

**21** After this, Jesus appeared to his disciples again. It was by the Sea of Galilee. Here is what happened. **2** Simon Peter and Thomas, who was also called Didymus, were there together. Nathanael from Cana in Galilee and the sons of Zebedee were with them. So were two other disciples. **3** "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them. They said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat. That night they didn't catch anything.

**4** Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore. But the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

**5** He called out to them, "Friends, don't you have any fish?"

"No," they answered.

**6** He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat. There you will find some fish." When they did, they could not pull the net into the boat. There were too many fish in it.

7 Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Simon Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Peter heard that, he put his coat on. He had taken it off earlier. Then he jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat. They were towing the net full of fish. The shore was only about 100 yards away. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals. There were fish on it. There was also some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat. He dragged the net to shore. It was full of large fish. There were 153 of them. But even with that many fish the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them. He did the same thing with the fish. 14 This was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When Jesus and the disciples had finished eating, Jesus spoke to Simon Peter. He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he answered. "You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

16 Again Jesus asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17 Jesus spoke to him a third time. He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter felt bad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He answered, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. 18 What I'm about to tell you is true. When you were younger, you dressed yourself. You went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands. Someone else will dress you. Someone else will lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to point out how Peter would die. His death would bring glory to God. Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"

20 Peter turned around. He saw that the disciple Jesus loved was following them. He was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper. He had said, "Lord, who is going to hand you over to your enemies?" 21 When Peter saw that disciple, he asked, "Lord, what will happen to him?"

22 Jesus answered, "Suppose I want him to remain alive until I return. What does that matter to you? You must follow me." 23 Because of what Jesus said, a false report spread among the believers. The story was told that the disciple Jesus loved wouldn't die. But Jesus did not say he would not die. He only said, "Suppose I want him to remain alive until I return. What does that matter to you?"

Let us pray.

What an incredible story for us to live into today. As I've sat with this text, there are several important things I'd like to lift up for us. What's the big deal about these guys going fishing again? How does Jesus meet them in this moment? What are the nuances in Jesus and Peter's use of love in their exchange? And what is God calling out to us today?

This is where it all began. When Jesus first called these men to leave their nets and to follow him. Which they did. And what a heck of a ride it has been these past three years.

But then with Jesus' execution. It all seems as not. The kingdom did not arrive as they had hoped. Who wants to sit around and waste their days reflecting on what could have been but isn't?

What do you do?

Peter, being Peter, basically says, "Well... I guess we go back to what we know." "I'm going fishing." And the others say, "Yep. Us too."

Because that's what we do, isn't it?

When life doesn't turn out the way we hoped... when things fall apart... when faith gets confusing, messy, or costly... we go back to what we can control. Back to what's familiar. Back to what feels safe.

The disciples had spent three years following Jesus. Three years of miracles, teaching, transformation. And then... the cross. The confusion. The grief. Even with the resurrection, they don't quite know what to do next.

So they go fishing.

And here's the thing—it's not just about fish. It's about retreat. It's about slipping back into an old identity because the new one feels too uncertain.

But Jesus isn't finished with them.

He shows up on the shore. Calls out to them— "Friends, haven't you caught any fish?"

That's not a question you ask seasoned fishermen who have spent their whole night out and haven't caught a thing. Jesus already knew the answer. It's like when someone asks, "So... how's that working out for you?" You know you're in trouble.

They grumbly say, "No." But I imagine they added a few other four letter Fisherman words if you get my drift.

Jesus tells them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. The right side of the boat. Not the wrong one. Again not something you say to seasoned fishermen. And suddenly—abundance. So many fish they can't even haul it in.

And that's when it clicks. John says, "It is the Lord!" He's the first to recognize Jesus.

And Peter—again, being Peter—all show, doesn't wait for the boat. He throws on his coat and jumps into the water. Which, by the way, is not how I would have

handled it. I would have said, “Let’s bring the boat in calmly, dry, with dignity.” Peter’s like, “No time for dignity. I’m swimming.”

By the time they get to shore, Jesus has already prepared breakfast. Bread. Fish. And a charcoal fire.

And that detail matters.

Because the last time we saw a charcoal fire in John’s Gospel... was the night Peter denied Jesus.

In John 18, after Jesus’s arrest, and as he predicted, Peter denied Jesus three times before the night was over. And the first time it happened, John said, “It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a charcoal fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Same smell. Same setting. Same sensory trigger.

And suddenly, Peter isn’t just standing on a beach. He’s back in that courtyard. Hearing his own words—“I don’t know him. I don’t know him. I don’t know him.” Feeling the weight of failure all over again.

Matthew and Mark recorded Peter saying to Jesus at the Last Supper, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”<sup>2</sup> Luke recorded Peter saying, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”<sup>3</sup>

The gist was that Peter, in word at least, was fully committed to loving Jesus with his life, until the rubber hit the road. And then he was out of there!

You see, Jesus doesn’t avoid that moment. He recreates it.

Not to shame Peter.

But to restore him.

After breakfast, Jesus turns to him and says, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Not “Peter,” the rock. Simon. His old name. His father’s name for him. Now growing up whenever my mother called me by my full name...Joseph Christopher Montovino...I knew she meant business. I’d better show up.

It’s like Jesus is saying, “Let’s be honest about where we are.”

And notice the question: “Do you love me more than these?”

More than what?

More than the fish?

More than his friends?

More than the old life?

More than your need to go back to what’s safe?

Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:18

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:35, Mark 14:31

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:33

But in the original Greek language, something subtle is happening. Jesus asked with the word *agapas* for love that means a deep, sacrificial, all-in kind of love. And Peter responds with a word for love that means friendship—affection, loyalty, but not quite that same depth.

It's as if Jesus says, "Do you love me with everything?"

And Peter says, "Lord... I care about you deeply as a friend."

Three times this happens.

And by the third time, Jesus meets Peter where he is. He uses Peter's word for love. "Do you love me deeply—as a friend?"

Peter is hurt. Not just because of the repetition. But because he knows why it's three times. Three denials. Three restorations. And each time, Jesus responds the same way:

"Feed my lambs."

"Take care of my sheep."

"Feed my sheep."

Do we see what Jesus is doing?

He's not just forgiving Peter. He's re-commissioning him.

"Peter, I'm not done with you yet. Your failure is not the end of your calling. Let's try again."

Friends, that's grace.

And if we're honest, most of us have had our "going fishing" moments.

Times when we stepped away from something God called us to...

Times when we said, "That was too much... I can't go there again..."

Times when we quietly slipped back into what felt easier and safe.

Maybe it was serving. Maybe it was trusting. Maybe it was loving someone well. Jesus meets us there—not with condemnation, but with breakfast.

And maybe a little humor too. I imagine Jesus flipping fish on the fire like, "So... how'd that all-night fishing trip go? Productive?"

And then, gently, lovingly— "Do you love me?" "Then let's begin again."

That's the invitation.

Not to pretend the past didn't happen. Not to minimize our failure. But to let grace rewrite the ending.

That's what repentance is. That's how forgiveness works. And once Peter takes hold of that which first took hold of him. He was all in. And upon Peter, Christ built his Church... which we will learn more about over the next several months through our study of the Book of Acts.

Maybe for you, it's not the smell of incense. Maybe it's a song. A place. A moment. Something that reminds us: God has been there all along.

Calling us back. Not to guilt. But to purpose.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks us. "Then feed my sheep."

Not perfectly. Not with everything figured out. But faithfully, from where we are.

So the questions for us this morning are simple: What nets have we gone back to? What callings have we abandoned? What issues or loved ones have we avoided? What current invitations are we ignoring? And where might Jesus be standing on the shore...already preparing a way forward for us?

Because the good news is this:

Jesus doesn't just meet us at our best. He meets us in our retreat. In our failure. In our half-hearted love. And he says, "Let's pick this up and try again."

Peter accepted grace and changed the world. Will we?

Amen.