

“T’shuvah!”

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John 21:1-19

T’shuvah! Say it with me
“t’shuvah!” Have you heard this one before? It is an ancient Hebrew word and holds many layers and a great depth of meaning for the Jewish faith. As we’ll see, it also may hold great meaning for us as Christians. We’ll get to that in a couple of minutes.

So, hold that thought as we get into a story about Peter in the gospel of John. This takes place after Jesus’ crucifixion and after the resurrection at the end of the book

Read John 21:1-19

Jesus had appeared to people several times after the resurrection, but they didn’t really know yet what to make of the resurrection or what it meant.

In this passage, Peter and a few other disciples are out fishing. This doesn’t seem strange. Peter after all was a fisherman before he met Jesus. The Bible doesn’t say why

they were out there, but here are three possible reasons.

1. Perhaps they needed to eat and they were out to catch some fish for supper.

2. Maybe Peter and the others were out fishing because they didn’t have anything better to do. Jesus wasn’t around to continue their teaching, so maybe they were simply hanging out, killing time, doing something for themselves.

3. Or, perhaps they are out there because Peter and the others were still confused about what Jesus’ death and resurrection meant. Maybe Peter saw the past few years of his life with Jesus as a season that had come to an end. He had been moved by it all but didn’t know what to do with it, so in the meantime he went back to what was familiar and comfortable for him — fishing.

Perhaps Peter was at a point of confusion, not knowing how to write the next chapter of his life.

This makes sense for Peter after the resurrection. Think about it. His hope for salvation through a political revolution in the face of the Romans seemed to have died on the cross.

The cross changed everything and nothing made sense any more. Without knowing what to do, Peter was back out in his boat fishing because that was how he used to make his living.

This must have been really depressing for him — Peter did everything he knew how to do and he didn't catch anything. You could say that doing it his own way, Peter was coming up empty on all fronts.

Peter was stuck. It seemed his time with Jesus met a dead end, he couldn't go back to his old life of fishing, and he didn't know how to go forward. All he got when he tried was an empty net.

Peter's life was on pause without a purpose. He was staring at a blank future.

Have you ever been at that point in life when one chapter has ended and the next chapter seems to be full of nothing?

Perhaps you have gone through a divorce, or break up. Maybe you have been downsized out of a job or are at the point of retirement. Maybe you moved and hadn't become familiar with the new community and new friends.

Perhaps you are at a point of major decision in your life and feel like you are at a fork in the road. The future is a complete fog.

Going through a time like that has people feeling anxious, lonely, afraid, and confused.

Have you ever been there?

Perhaps Peter was at that point sitting there in his fishing boat.

Then Jesus called to him from the shore and instructed him to throw the nets out on the right side of the boat. He did and caught a net full of fish.

Peter and his friends came in from the lake to find that Jesus had already made a fire and wanted to cook some of the fish for breakfast. So they sat down with Jesus once more.

Jesus' message for Peter was simple. He asked Peter three times if he loved him to affirm his commitment. This paralleled the three times that Peter had denied Jesus before going to the cross.

The night when Peter denied Jesus was **the** crucial point for him when his whole life — his hopes and dreams had fallen apart. That was

the point when Peter's future entered the fog. Things were not supposed to go that way!

At this point, Peter's confidence and faith were fragile, but now after seeing Jesus again he was given a chance to reaffirm his faith and restore his confidence.

Jesus asked Peter once again to follow him — and of course he said that he would.

Peter had been trying to go his own way, doing his own thing. But then, with Jesus' nudge, he was able to return to the path on which Jesus had originally called him.

Let's go back a bit to look at how Peter became a disciple. Peter was a fisherman by trade. Matthew and Mark's Gospel accounts describe how Peter was called by Jesus out of his fishing boat in a story very similar to the one that I just read at the end of John's Gospel.

It was a great honor to be called as a rabbi's disciple — so Peter left his nets, left his profession, left his parent's house, and followed Jesus.

He learned from Jesus and grew in wisdom and understanding,

although he was still trying to sort out what it meant that Jesus was arrested and crucified.

He knew that Jesus was God's chosen one — but what did that mean for his life, for the lives of others, and for the world?

Before Jesus was arrested, Peter spoke up to declare that he would follow Jesus no matter what happened, even to the the ends of the earth, and even to the death.

And yet, shortly after saying this, he denied Jesus three times and was burdened with guilt.

Then Jesus went to the cross and Peter got all mixed up.

I can imagine Peter thinking about Jesus and two years of training, and then the reality hitting him that Jesus was dead. I can see him shaking his head thinking "What just happened? I can't believe it!" and then being so hurt that he is tempted to leave it all behind.

Did you see the movie "Miracles From Heaven"? I highly recommend it!

In that movie, a 10-year old girl has a life-threatening condition and her mother, played by Jennifer Garner,

is very distraught over what looks like her daughter's life painfully fading away.

In one moving scene, she asks how a loving God could allow this to happen to her and her daughter. At that point, she lost her faith in God and at the same time chose to leave her church.

Does that resonate for any of you? Have you felt that way? You were ready to hang it all up because things just didn't make sense any more?

Maybe Peter had lost faith in Jesus after things didn't go as he expected.

Peter doubted and this knocked him off course. He needed to be called again by Jesus to come back to his path.

This brings us back to the title of the sermon. This is about the process called t'shuvah. Say it with me again, t'shuvah!

T'Shuvah is an ancient Hebrew word that has many dimensions of meaning.

It begins with our inherent and fundamental goodness and a recognition that this is what it

means to be human. T'shuvah begins by saying, as Genesis chapter one does, that God created all things, including human beings, good.

T'shuvah affirms that our nature as human beings is full of the divine spark. As Genesis says, we are made in the image of God and our basic nature reflects God's nature. At the very deepest core of our humanity there is a goodness.

Our first path in life has us held in God's full embrace of love from birth, and that is enough.

T'shuvah then includes this idea that along the way, we stray from that path into sin. We choose things that end up hurting ourselves, others, and the world around us. We lie, cheat, steal, destroy, manipulate, hurt. We participate in oppression and dehumanize others and cause them pain. We participate in evil systems that exploit people.

It is easy to identify how we have done this, because we often sit in regret and grief over what we have done.

We have wandered off our path.

Within this idea of t'shuvah there is a point when we look at our lives and what we have done and see clearly that we have wander from our path, from what was good.

We recognize that what we have been doing wasn't about peace, about joy, about love, about generosity, about hospitality.

We look at our lives and say "Oh, man! I need to stop this! I need to return to the way of goodness."

Part of T'shuvah is acknowledgement that we have gone astray and then taking the crucial step to turn or return from a back to our first path.

T'shuvah takes seriously both our goodness and our sinfulness. It also acknowledges that we have the power to choose to make right what we have messed up. We can make amends and restore what was lost.

I would be willing to bet that some of those who marched in Charlottesville last weekend with their torches and hate-filled speech will experience t'shuvah as God is working in their heart and they realize the error of their ways. I can imagine someone sitting in an interview with a journalist years

from now talking about how they had a change of heart, and are now working for peace.

This is t'shuvah!

T'shuvah in Hebrew scriptures is often translated as a more recognizable word, "repentance" which captures the idea of returning back to goodness. And it was John the Baptist's primary message and then also became the beginning point of Jesus' ministry.

"T'shuvah, for the Kingdom of God is here!" Jesus said.

Along the journey of life this is about being open for God to illuminate the way back home.

Jesus called Peter to follow him the first time — to turn from life as a fisherman and head into a life of service to others in ministry.

Then during the time of the crucifixion he fell away. He lost his zeal for doing God's work. He was back out on his boat. But Jesus called him to t'shuvah — to turn, to return back to his true path.

You and me, like Peter, have strayed from our path, haven't we?

How often do you feel like you have lost your way? How often have you found yourself making life for yourself or others a mess? How often have you lost the discipline of praying and reading scripture, of serving and giving to others selflessly, of standing for justice? We all wander away.

Like Peter we are also being called to t'shuvah! — to return to live in goodness, live in love, live in peace, reconcile with those we have hurt.

Today, let us commit to the process of t'shuvah, turning from where we have strayed and once again seek God.

Jesus is always there to receive us warmly and generously with open arms of love.