

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Third Sunday of Easter – April 10, 2016

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 21:1-14

Fish Stories

For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:12 NRSV)

Patricia suddenly opened her eyes. The sky was just fading from black to grey - dawn. She knew immediately that something was wrong.

She had been working on this boat for nearly a year - deep sea fishing off the coast of California. It was a 42 foot cabin cruiser - with a small bow - and a cabin toward the front. The large, flat deck spread out behind - with a hatch opening to below deck that they would fill with ice and, hopefully, large catches of fish. Between the hatch and the stern was a huge spool that held a mesh net.

Patricia liked to think of the boat itself as a fishing rod, with a gigantic reel at the back from which they would cast their line. As the boat moved slowly forward and the net came off the reel, they would snap 120 buoys onto it, one after the other. 18 inches below the buoys that floated on the surface of the water, the cross-hatched net would hang down creating a wall 90 feet deep and over a mile long - actually longer than the legal limit.

They fished for thresher shark - fish with tails as long as their bodies, creatures that ate anchovies, stunning with their tails and turning to swallow their unconscious prey. The captain and crew of two would drop a mesh large enough to allow the shark snouts to pass through, but small enough to catch their gills as they turned and thrashed. When the net was full enough, they would haul the net up slowly onto the hydraulic reel.

Hanging over the greenish-blue water Patricia would watch for color, grey or white, rising out of the darkness, signaling the appearance of their catch. Every now and then, when it was stormy or the water was choppy or the reflected sky was too grey, the color would not show and the catch would surprise them as it rose out of the water. As the net came over the stern, they would dump the fish onto the slippery deck, then drag them around to the hatch...dropping them onto the ice below.

Patricia knew the feel of the boat - the way it moved, full or empty - the way it dragged - with the net partially or fully extended. She knew when she woke up that morning that something was wrong.

The night before, the captain had insisted on staying out for one more catch. They set their wall of net across more than a mile of the Catalina channel - an area well-traveled by dolphins and other protected species. With deep misgivings, Patricia had gone to sleep to the sound of the others laughing and drinking and talking loudly into the night. Apparently they had fallen asleep on their watch. Neither of them had awakened her for her watch at 3 a.m. The coming of color into the sky and the lightness of the cruiser in the water snapped Patricia into consciousness.

She pulled on her jacket and moved as quickly as she could across the deck, past the hatch, to the reel at the stern. The net was gone. Thousands of dollars in materials alone had disappeared into the night. She searched the water all around them as panic rose up in her throat. A few hundred feet off to one side she caught sight of a buoy bobbing on the slate colored water.

Waking the captain and the other crew member, she steered the cruiser over to the lone buoy and discovered, to her relief, that the net was still attached. They reattached that end of the net to the hydraulic reel and began hauling it back on board. The tension on the net was incredible - tighter than when it held the largest catch of the year. The mesh snapped and hissed as it came up out of the water. The stern of the boat was pulled down toward the bottom of the channel. The hydraulics could hardly withstand the pressure - much less the weight of the net on the reel. So, as it became partially full, they cut the net off the reel, unloaded it into the hatch - which also made the boat lower in the water and more stable - attached the new end of the net to the reel and began hauling again.

Patricia stripped off her jacket and checked for color constantly, watching the drops of water snap violently off the mesh - catching glints of sunlight as the morning wore on - the sound of tension grinding into her nerves.

Fill the reel, cut the net, unload the reel, reattach the net, fill the reel, cut the net, and on and on for hours - as sweat dripped from their bodies and transitory flashes of color passed into illusion.

Hours later, as all three of them and their hydraulic system began to reach their limit of endurance, Patricia saw what seemed to be real color emerging from obscurity, rising

to meet her out of the darkness. She held her breath as drops of salt water fell from her eyebrows, meeting the salt spray flung upward from the net. The light color came closer and closer to the surface, the water distortions resolving into shape. And as it came clear, Patricia's heart stopped - then began pounding in her ears. What she saw rising toward her were the immense flukes of a whale.

As they had slept and neglected their duties, as they broke the laws of preservation in the interest of one more catch, in the darkness of the night, this gentle mammal disguised as a fish had become entangled in a wall of mesh 90 feet deep and over a mile long. As they slept, this creature who sang and breathed air, just like we do, fought for its life, tangled up in greed and neglect, sounding - hoping to lose its fetters by sheer depth and distance - drowning in a desperate dive for freedom. Hauled up from the bottom of the channel, death became color and pounded in the veins of a human being.

As the flukes broke the surface of the water, Patricia cut loose the remaining portion of the net and it sank with the whale - all color disappearing into the darkness of the ocean. The boat settled itself in the water - heavy with broken mesh and shock. After a few moments of numb reorganization, the crew silently headed for shore.

They sustained \$15,000 in losses. It took them months to repair their net. Patricia never really recovered from that glimpse of awesome mystery and immense beauty which had dangled a few moments from her dripping fingers. As she worked on the net, she bound an unspeakable sense of overwhelming death into every new crosshatch and knot, salt tears burning under her eyelids, her hands clumsy with grief.

(Story heard 2/93 - written/retold with permission from Patricia Contaxis, Berkely, CA 6/93)

For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:12 NRSV)

Peter's hands were undoubtedly clumsy with grief that evening as he repaired nets that had been set aside three years earlier. He and his brother, Andrew, had set them aside because they had been inspired to follow a man - someone they had hoped was Messiah - sent from God to save Israel. Over the last three years with Jesus, Peter had discovered more than an elusive, mysterious hope in the man. Jesus had become a REAL hope, as well as a REAL rabbi and teacher, friend and comrade. And now he was dead.

Salt tears stung under his eyelids, as Peter's fingers searched numbly for broken mesh and tied hard, little knots that matched the lump in his throat. It was only about a week ago that Jesus - that gentle God disguised as a human being - had been nailed and cut - and allowed to bleed to death.

Only a week ago Peter had run with one of Zebedee's sons - John, the disciple Jesus had called "Beloved" - to find the tomb open and violated, no sign of Jesus or God - just emptiness.

What hurt the most in the remembering was his own denial of Jesus as he warmed himself by the fire in the courtyard of the high priest the night Jesus was arrested. Remorse weighed heavily on his aching shoulders - the smell of charcoal still burned his nostrils.

In the emptiness and aimlessness of the following week, Peter felt lost and useless - and decided to go home. Relieved by Peter's decision to DO something, a few of his friends joined him - most of them fishermen - also from his hometown - James and John, of course, probably Philip and brother Andrew - and a few like Thomas and Nathanael (from the hill country) who didn't know what to do with themselves or their knotted up feelings.

As that miserable bunch pattered about on the shores of Lake Tiberius, that familiar Sea of Galilee, Peter remembered Jesus saying not long ago:

"The hour is coming, indeed, it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone."

(John 16:32 NRSV)

It felt more like Jesus had left THEM alone - that all mystery and beauty and meaning had been murdered along with him - murdered at the hands of fear and greed, hands that grasped for power and neglected to tend their own souls. So the friends of Jesus HAD scattered - feeling directionless and cut loose from their moorings, not sure of what they had seen or not seen, what was real and what was illusion.

At this point in the most ancient accounts, the Disciples only knew that Jesus was dead, that was all. They had not seen Jesus since the moment he was laid to rest in Joseph's tomb.

The pall that hung over the group that evening was stifling. It tasted like overwhelming death and smelled like charcoal. Peter finished the last of his repairs on the nets,

stood up and said, "I am going fishing." What else was there to do - but return to the familiar, the actual, a known and perfectly acceptable vocation?

Three years ago Jesus had said something about being "fishers of men" and said even more about being shepherds of some sort. But shepherds had to care for their sheep, tend their flocks, do a lot of extra emotional stuff that Peter felt incapable of right then.

As fishers of FISH, all they had to do was CATCH the darn things and eat them - or sell them to others so THEY could eat them. Much simpler.

Besides, Peter had no energy for figuring things out right now. The smell of charcoal had even permeated his soul.

"I am going fishing," Peter announced. His friends got up and said, "We'll go too." Stimulating conversation after so much silence. Besides, night fishing on Tiberius was better in a lot of ways - the fish were fresh for selling the next morning. It was practical, it was cooler, it was familiar, it was lucrative. It was an old habit that might get them through this rough patch that Mary - good, old Mary from Bethany - called "grief." She understood what they were doing. If SHE did, then Jesus would have. Those two had the same heart.

They went out and got into the boat,
but that night they caught nothing. (John 21:3b NRSV)

Stripped down to his fisherman's smock, as naked as his soul underneath, Peter worked beside his friends all night. Stiff with silence and mutual pain, they cast Peter's nets over the black water in a motion they had learned from their fathers, hauling in the nets, casting again in that familiar arc, hauling in the nets, casting, hauling, casting - sweat dripping from their faces and bodies, mingling with the spray from the arcing nets and the slippery pools on the planks beneath their bare feet.

Their arms and shoulders and backs ached - reminding them of muscles that they had set aside with their nets for three years. It was a long night - and an unproductive one. They did the same things they'd always done, repeated motions that had been successful for them before - and their ancestors before them, repeated and repeated that arc of arm and net and body and water. But still, no fish.

Peter sighed. It was to be expected. Ever since they had MET Jesus they had been unable to catch fish without his help. And now he was gone - taking everything - even their old lives - with him. Nothing would ever be the same.

The sky faded from black to grey - and a light mist rose and hovered over the slate colored water - as each man dropped his end of each net and slid down with the wet mesh into the bottom of the boat - admitting exhaustion and defeat. Peter and John slowly turned the craft and headed in the direction of the shore.

As they got close enough to make out the shoreline, the figure of a man emerged from the obscurity of mist and bad light, as if he and they were moving toward one another under water. A voice distorted and dulled by the water in the air called out to them:

"Children, you have no fish, have you?" (John 21:5 NRSV)

Peter and John, now standing, called back "no," as the others huddled on the nets turned and squinted toward the shore.

The voice came again:

"Cast the net to the RIGHT side of the boat,
and you will find some." (John 21:6 NRSV)

Well, they couldn't say WHY they did it, but something in that voice made them obey those instructions. Fishing so close to the shore seemed kind of unorthodox. And what did it matter WHAT side of the boat they cast from? How did HE know where the fish were? As those and other vague thoughts drifted through their tired minds, they scrambled heavily for their nets. Trying not to rock the boat, they cast the largest one from the RIGHT side. Immediately, they felt the tug and burn of mesh digging into their hands as a huge shoal of live ones entangled themselves in the net. The weight was too heavy to haul up into the boat, so they prepared to tow it behind for the last 100 yards.

John, the Beloved, one who had always been more sensitive and perceptive than the rest of them - when it came to matters of the heart and soul - John leaned over to Peter at that point and said,

"It is the Lord." (John 21:7 NRSV)

Peter's heart stopped - then it began to pound in his ears. He quickly pulled a robe over his smock, tucked it into his waistband and, without stopping to check the shoreline for confirmation, dove off over the gunwales into the grey waters of Tiberias, leaving his rocking boat behind.

The ground rose steeply up and out of the lapping shallows. As Peter stood ankle deep - breathing heavily and wringing out his robe, the smell of charcoal from a fire up the beach burned his nostrils - and his hands pulled his robe into place - covering his aching body and his raw spirit.

Jesus was calmly cooking fish and toasting bread. And as the boat ground up onto the beach, he said to them:

"Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." (John 21:10 NRSV)

Peter turned, and as the other disciples stood gaping at the sight of Jesus alive again, he climbed back onto his boat and hauled the net around the boat. The others came to - in time to help him get the catch up onto the beach.

As they automatically counted the fish into flopping piles of ten, Peter noted that there was not even one tear in the net - astonishing - especially with such a large catch, 153 - all big ones, not a throw-back among them.

Jesus called again, from the fire:

"Come and have breakfast." (John 21:12 NRSV)

And with gentle hands and that familiar look of pained affection - Jesus served up toasted bread and hot, cooked fish - ichthys - brain food, food to restore their exhausted bodies and minds.

Jesus listened as they talked, some with their mouths full - laughed with them in relief - listened to their wonderings - answered quietly as many questions as he could in the spaces between them - absorbed every detail of the last week and the painful description of how his death, his absence, the emptiness had taken the heart out of them.

And he watched Peter - as he stood alone and silent - shivering and steaming as he dried himself by the fire - hope flickering in his eyes -

- hope that Jesus was back to stay
- hope that there would be a second chance,
a way to recover from his denials
with renewed declarations of love
- hope that there was a way to wash the smell of charcoal from his soul
- hope that there was a way to live again after so much death
- hope that he might rediscover the mystery
and the beauty and the meaning
of having left his boat and his nets
to follow Messiah.

Sometimes, these days, we are overwhelmed by death, the torn limbs and lost lives of recent bombs and long wars. We are surrounded by the stench of greed and the murderous breath of those grasping for power. Our own neglectfulness, our denials and betrayals, rise up to choke us - they hang on our souls like the smell of charcoal.

Sometimes it feels like all mystery and beauty, all goodness and gentleness and meaning hang heavy and lifeless in tangled mesh of our own creation.

Sometimes we feel the holes in our nets, the strands that broke trying to haul in new members or raise enough money to sustain an albatross of a building or even keep the roof on a small one. We touch the cords that were never repaired, hoping there was enough net left intact - with mesh small enough to catch something, anything to sustain us and our loved ones.

We continue to cast our broken nets in the same old ways - in the familiar ways that our parents taught us, in the ways that have always worked before. We cast and haul - over and over, and over and over again - wondering why the nets come up only one-quarter full or entirely empty or, heaven forbid, tangled in the flukes of a great, mysterious beauty that has died among us - by our own hands - as we slept.

It has been two millennia, after all, since Jesus lived and died and was seen alive again by the Sea of Galilee. It has been a long time since the Disciples were alive and breathing and telling the story of God who became human in order to help us mend our nets and get on with the real business of fishing and shepherding, and teaching and healing, and loving one another into relationship with the Holy - the Sacred - the gentle, mysterious, beautiful meaning that beats at the heart of life.

It has been a long time since the story was new and real and more than a dream in a long night.

But if we can wake up and open our eyes
- if we can breathe slowly and deeply
- if we can allow the numbness to leave our aching hands and shoulders -
 allow the pain to move through and beyond our bodies -
 allow ourselves to feel
- if we can turn negative patterns of thought to silence -
 take time to mend our nets using new ideas and technology and
 our intuition
- if we can allow ourselves to do something different -
 like throwing our nets off the OTHER side of the boat- closer to shore

- and watching carefully for color rising to meet us out of the
darkness and obscurity of the world
- if we can listen to the voices of people different than we are -
younger, older, different races and sexual orientations -
different genders and economic experiences -
people with different metaphors for God and
different pieces of the truth -
listening as we have NEVER listened before -
discovering new ways of thinking and being THE CREATION
- if we can face and accept change with courage
and relief from the weight of resistance
- if we can create change - with tenderness and respect for tradition -
with the warm anticipation of the Holy Spirit moving among us
- if we can sense the sound of that sacred voice
deep within the world and ourselves -
a voice which we can still trust and obey -
a voice that calls us to wash ourselves clean
of charcoal and neglect, of greed and betrayal -
a voice that call us to believe that transformation is possible -
for ourselves, for those we've given up on
- if we can look each other in the eyes with recognition -
share toasted bread and cooked fish
and watch the sun come up over the dazzling blue water
one more time -
dissolving our night of grief with the coming of the light

Then...

THEN...

- Mammals disguised as fish will sing and breach and sound
and rise again in the waters from Alaska to Baja.
- Then God disguised as human beings will sing and work
and play in peace across the living land again.
- Then Messiah will walk in our midst again
and we will be wise again
and we will be the Church again.
- Mystery and beauty and meaning will be reborn.
- And we will have new fish stories to tell.

John 21:1-14

21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.³ Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.⁵ Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'⁶ He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake.⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.¹⁰ Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.'¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.¹² Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord.¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God - be within us.

Sound in our souls, diving deep into our very being,
guiding us to the source of meaning and feeling and knowing.
Breach in our minds, allowing us to breathe and fill our bodies
with understanding and new insight, purpose and vision.

Holy God - be around us.

Surround our salty, liquid bodies with the immense security
of your oceanic love.
Buoy us up in the storm, cool us in the heat of the day,
show us the beauty of Creation in your changing colors that
reflect both sky and land.
Offer up the treasures that lie deep within you
that we might find them tangible and real
on the shoreline we call home.

Holy God - be among us.

Draw us into your presence with a familiar voice,
lead us to recognition of you in this moment - in one another
- in those gentle acts we do for others.
Feed our bodies and our minds with hope and patience
and laughter and healing.
Show us how to be the Church again,
nurturing the mystery and beauty and sacredness of life,
telling the stories of how you walk among us even now,
causing us to pray with every breath, in every moment,
in your name.

Amen.