

Imagining Life's New Normal
John 21:1-14

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Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." Jn. 21:3a

We are all anxious for these COVID restrictions to be lifted so we can get our lives back to the way they were before all this started. But will the life to which we return be as it was before we left or will the normal of old be somehow be transformed by what we are going through now?

Let's put the question to a text. We do not have a crystal ball to show us the future, but we have in the scriptures a lamp to our feet and a light upon our path (Ps. 119:105).

Peter's recent experience

The opening verses of John 21 can be especially helpful to us now. Candidly, this 21st chapter may not have been part of the Fourth Gospel in its first edition. There is good reason to believe someone – whether the original author or another – decided belatedly that this material was worth remembering along with the rest and added it. Give our present situation we can be especially grateful it is here, for it seems directly fit to guide us in imagining the new normal we will encounter when restrictions are lifted.

The opening scene of John 21 follows Peter. Other disciples are present but the focus is on Peter. He had been through three years of significant change. He had followed Jesus, he had listened to Jesus, he had given up much for the sake of Jesus. However it was he had lived before, over the course of these three years Jesus became his center. He was now a different man. Three years with Jesus changed him significantly.

Now, after those three years of significant change, he just endured three days of tremendous transformation. At first every fact he faced broke his heart and left him in tears. There was the brutal fact of the crucifixion. Jesus, the one in whom Peter had staked his life, was dead, and he died in unspeakable suffering and miserable defeat. If there could be any fact more brutal than that, it was this, and it completely crushed Peter: he had denied Jesus, he denied even knowing him. So not only was Jesus dead in defeat, Peter was a failure in his own eyes and abhorrent to his own soul.

And yet, in a matter of three days, everything shifted. The news broke that Jesus had risen from the dead and proof of his life came when he appeared to them suddenly in the room even though the door was locked. What a roller coaster those three days had to have been, from the deepest depths of despair to the wondrous heights of joy. Peter had been through three years of significant change followed by three days of tremendous transformation.

And now, what was Peter to do next? He went fishing. He went back to his old life. We can follow the story as it unfolds and read it right alongside our lives as we think about what is going to happen next.

Peter's new normal was like his past

John 21 begins with the disciples gathered sometime after the Lord's first and second appearing. Picturing them, I imagine they are sitting around looking at one another, wondering what to do next, each hoping another will take the lead and offer a suggestion. They were accustomed to Jesus setting the agenda, but Jesus was no longer there to set the course for each day. Uncertainty prevailed. At last Peter – maybe out of frustration, maybe out of boredom – said, "I am going fishing."

Peter returned to his old life. Mark tells us that when Jesus called Peter to be a disciple he was in the fishing business (Mk. 1:16). Peter knew the life of the seas, the life of the fishing boats, the life of the fishing nets. He knew the pleasure of the catch and the frustration of getting skunked. It was no hobby for him, no happy recreation. Fishing was Peter's business. He was a small businessman who knew the life of overhead and payroll, gains and losses, assets and liabilities. The very thing Peter left before he met Jesus is what he went back to. His new normal was like his past. "I am going fishing."

Peter's new normal was unlike his past

Here I want to press a metaphor for a moment. Peter is fishing not too far off shore. He is at least close enough to the shore that a man standing there – Peter does not know who it is – can see Peter is having no luck and can call to him. The man can see Peter is fishing off the left side of the boat, and he suggests he fish off the right side of the boat.

You can turn off your computer if you think I am pressing this metaphor too far, but I'm using it to suggest Peter had a standard way of doing things in his former fishing days and he was defaulting to them now. He fished off the left side of the boat because he was accustomed to fishing off the left side of the boat. That was his method, his routine, his way of going about the business of his life.

It proved unproductive and he had to learn a new way. It was the old lifestyle – fishing – but done differently – off the other side of the boat.

If we shine this much of the text on our lives it helps us see that life after the quarantine will be like life before the quarantine but it will be different from the way it was. Phrased in the language of the metaphor, we will still be able to fish but we will have to learn how to fish off the other side of the boat. We will be able to return to life as it was, but when we get there we may see we will have to do things differently.

But do be sure to take into consideration the rest of our text, laying it alongside life as well.

Peter's new normal had the abundance of God in it

The abundance of God available to Peter, and also to us, is shown in the text in three ways.

There is Jesus himself. Somebody, one of the disciples, after hearing that stranger on the shore who was taking an interest in them, seeing their empty net, their disappointment, their frustration, and their fatigue, rubbed his eyes, did a double-take, and looked again. "It's the Lord!" he cried. They all soon saw Jesus must have been there on the shore for some time, for he had a fire kindled. Let's you and I draw from that the point that, whatever the future may hold for us, Christ is already in it, already at home in it, and already domesticating it. Christ himself is in our future and there is no better gift, no finer answer to prayer, than his own dear presence. There is in the future the abundance of Christ.

Not only is there the abundance of Jesus, there is the abundance of that marvelous catch. Note two things about the marvelous catch. It is so abundant that the lot of those in the boat weren't able to haul it in, and the abundance of the blessing was not threatened in the least because the net did not tear in the slightest even with its heavy load. Let's you and I draw from that the point that whatever the future will be, Christ is in it with blessings abundant and secure. Don't be afraid.

Not only is there the abundance of Jesus and the abundance of the marvelous catch, there is also the abundance of our Lord's marvelous invitation. "Come and have breakfast." And, look, it is not just breakfast; it is breakfast with him. The abundance of the Lord's blessing is never just about stuff. It is about a relationship with him.

There is no crystal ball to tell us when the restrictions will be lifted or what life outside quarantine will be like. But this text from John 21 shines a light into the future and begins to show we will return to life like it was though it will be different from what it was. Above all it gives us to believe the Lord of love is already in the future and is at home there with abundant blessings for us to receive.