

## ***“Both/And: Dancing and Shepherding”***

Psalm 30; John 21:4-6, 11-17

Third Sunday of Easter

Message for May 1, 2022

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This week’s “Both/And” is “Dancing and Shepherding.” We hear in our Bible Wisdom teachings, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” and we hear the call, “Tend my sheep.” We see that God restores and heals, inspiring a joyful dance. And we learn through the resurrected Christ that we can act on our love by continuing the work of Jesus as his disciples and shepherds.

This week as I have reflected further on the theme of “both/and,” I got thinking about a children’s book that my kids just loved growing up, called “That’s Good! That’s Bad!” It begins: “One day a little boy went to the zoo with his mother and father. They bought him a shiny red balloon.” The next page says, “It lifted him high up into the sky, Wow!” On the next page, you see him floating high above the zoo animals, and it says, “Oh, that’s good. *No that’s bad!*” As you turn the page, you see him hanging onto the string of the balloon for dear life, as he’s getting dragged through some trees. And the narrator tells us, “The balloon drifted for miles and miles until it came to a hot, steamy jungle. It broke on the branch of a tall, prickly tree, Pop!” On the next page you see this exploded balloon, which happens to be terrorizing a toucan, and you read what becomes a familiar refrain: “Oh that’s bad. *No, that’s good!*” Because the boy fortunately lands in some refreshing water (rather than coming to a crash on the ground). You get the idea – on each page we see the boy heading for disaster and then it turns out better than expected, but then it switches quickly back to yet another frightening scenario, until finally, at the end of the story, a stork happens to have snatched him up and conveniently flies over the zoo where he is dropped back into his parents’ arms. Whew!

Actually, it’s funny how often I think about that particular book as I’m going about the business of life. Often, we experience life as a kind of roller coaster – so many ups and downs! We hear a similar pattern from the psalmist today: “I cried to you for help, and you healed me.” “You brought up my soul from Sheol and restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.” Then, when things start going really well, the psalmist is convinced, “I’m all good – I’ve got it made, now!” Eugene Peterson’s

translation of Psalm 30 really gets to the heart of that passage: “When things were going great, I crowed, ‘I’ve got it made. I’m God’s favorite. He made me king of the mountain.’ Then you looked the other way and I fell to pieces.” The psalmist then cries to God, pleading for God’s grace, and God turns his mourning into dancing. Gratitude washes over him and he commits to being forever thankful.

This is such a human response – when we are struggling, we petition God for help out of the quagmire we are in. When we’re in the flow and things are clicking along, we feel like we’re on top of the world and we have no need for God’s help. We even tend to take credit for all the good stuff coming our way.

What the psalmist lifts up is that God is “my helper” (v. 10) in every experience of life, including life’s worst. This being the case, praise and thanksgiving (v. 4, 9, 12) become more than momentary responses to deliverance and good fortune. In essence, they become a way of life. It is the language of joy and gladness that goes with life and **is** life (v. 12). To live is to praise, and to praise is to live - this seems more closely to represent the psalmist’s experience — that is, the experience of joy, praise, and gratitude (v. 4, 5b, 11-12) in the midst of whatever life may bring, including current and ongoing struggle. A great illustration of “Both/And!”

What came to me while looking through this “both/and” lens while reading this week’s passage from the Gospel of John, was that the story of Peter, right on the heels of the story of Thomas last week, is yet another character who is often misinterpreted. Thomas is considered the “doubter” and Peter, the “denier.”

Rash and brash, Peter often appears impetuous and impulsive throughout the Gospels. From wanting a full body bath from Jesus at the foot washing, to striding out of the garden and cutting off the ear of Malchus, to getting dressed and jumping in the lake to get to Jesus on the shore, we’ve come to expect such behavior from Peter.

From this perspective, it’s easy to reduce the conversation we just heard between Jesus and Peter to a reinstatement of Peter’s discipleship or an attempt at some kind of reconciliation for a relationship gone bad. And so, it might make sense that this would be the moment when Jesus forgives

Peter, specifically for his foolishness and recklessness — he denied Jesus when Jesus needed him most.

**Except nowhere in the story does Jesus utter the words, “I forgive you” because Peter hasn’t done anything that needs Jesus’ forgiveness.** No, *the person who needs to forgive Peter, is Peter himself.*

Really, forgiveness is perhaps not even the issue at all. We like to fall back on it frequently, assuming that’s what is needed to fix a relationship - especially to mend this specific relationship. But really, what Peter needs is to accept *that Jesus sees what Peter can offer the world, he recognizes the gifts that Peter can tap into to serve others, he sees Peter’s potential, he wants Peter to continue on with the work that Jesus was doing.*

A rereading of Peter’s denial in John exposes his true rejection — that of his own identity. The question asked of Peter is not, as it is in the Synoptic Gospels, (Matthew, Mark, and Luke): “do you know the man?” To which Peter responds, “I don’t know the man.” Rather, in John, the question posed to Peter is, “aren’t you one of his disciples?” And Peter responds, “I AM not.”

Knowing this shifts how we understand their conversation in today’s Bible Wisdom Teaching. Jesus does not blame or shame Peter. Jesus does not ask for Peter’s repentance. Jesus does not ask three times, “Peter, do you love me?” to remind Peter of his three-fold denial, to test him or to trap him. If any of that is true, that’s not the Jesus I know, I love, or in whom I believe. Instead, Jesus calls Peter to bring his gifts to bear, to be the shepherd.

Denying our identity is an all too often reality. We deny who we are because we worry that we won’t meet expectations. We deny who we are because we are afraid to disappoint. We deny who we are because we could be judged, even rejected, for that truth. We deny who we are because we do not believe that we will be liked for who we truly are, or that we will be loved for who we truly are.

We play it safe around a lot of people in our lives, pretending, and rightly so. Not everyone deserves our truth. Not everyone can be trusted with our truth.

And, if this is the way we feel with the people in our lives, even those closest to us, I suspect the same would be true of our relationship with Jesus.

When I try to get inside what it must have been like to be Peter - when he was asked “aren’t you one of his disciples” - is that he must have been terrified - that what was about to happen to Jesus would happen to him. Maybe Peter was unwilling to admit his identity because he wasn’t ready yet — not that you ever can be, really. Maybe Peter couldn’t affirm his identity because the garden was too fresh in his mind, too painful, too personal. Maybe Peter was not able to say, “I AM” because he just couldn’t believe it himself.

I wonder **when**, (not if) we have felt the same. We just can’t imagine that Jesus would commend us with being the good shepherd when he can no longer be. We cannot believe that Jesus would trust us with making John 10:16 come true, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.” We cannot believe that Jesus could believe in us.

And so, Jesus shows up on that shore, hosts a meal one more time, and tells Peter, tells us, “I believe in you. I know who you are and I love you. And yes, you are exactly the disciple I need, the disciple the world needs.”

So in the coming days, as you contemplate the Bible Wisdom teachings, my prayer is that each of us will find the joy to dance and discern what ways we might be the shepherd – disciples called to share our gifts with the hurting world.

Amen