

“FOLLOWING CHRIST IN THE HARD TIMES” (5/2/10)

SCRIPTURES: Revelation 21: 1-6 & John 21: 1-19

KEY CONCEPTS: The promises & faithfulness of God during the hard times of our lives.

OPENING THOUGHTS:

Given the past 2 weeks, I thought it appropriate to revisit the sermon title from April 18, with the same Gospel reading as well as one of May 2 lectionary readings from the book of Revelation. As we continue our worship this morning, examining the written Word, I invite you to join me in prayer.

WILL YOU PRAY WITH ME?

PRAYER:

GOSPEL READING—JOHN 21: 1-19:

Typically, I focus on the conversation between Peter & Jesus that followed their early morning breakfast. Today, however, I DO want to acknowledge the first 14 verses of John, chapter 21.

Even after witnessing the Risen Jesus, the disciples (especially Peter) was restless & decided to go fishing. As you may remember, Peter, Andrew, James & John were commercial fishermen BEFORE answering the call to follow Jesus. Peter, when stressed about all the changes/loss, returned to what he knew: fishing.

And all night fishing expedition yielding nothing. In the early morning, Jesus stood on the beach & directed them to cast on the other side of the boat (like the fish wouldn't swim under the boats☺?) The fish were plentiful; the disciples realized it was Jesus; they brought extra fish to fry for breakfast, along with bread. Again, “fish & chips”. I wonder if they remembered Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 while eating with Him?

THOUGHTS/INSIGHTS:

A couple of comforting thoughts come to mind:

1. **QUALITY EVENTS IN OUR LIVES:** Sometimes when we're stressed or grieving, we return to something familiar – which might mean we need to fill our lives with quality people, activities & hobbies – so that when hard times comes we have something of value to turn to.
2. **COMFORT FOOD/GATHERING TOGETHER:** Though so much had changed in their lives (& in the life of Jesus), a meal offered some measure of normalcy in an otherwise stressful time. When we are stressed or grieving, we may not eat OR we may overeat. The key is to know yourself & balance the food with what we really need – fellowship.
3. **THIRD TIME'S A CHARM:** This was Jesus' 3rd time to visit the disciples. And following breakfast, He “reinstated Peter” by renewing his call to “feed lambs/sheep” & to follow Jesus. Jesus closes with the words: “Follow Me.”

PERSONAL APPLICATION (ONLINE):

The latter verses of this reading hold a special significance for me because about 23 years, I was willing to give up my ministry for a woman I was dating. I was in my last semester of seminary, unsure about my future & was leaning toward moving to Oklahoma just to be with a woman who wasn't really that good for me. In retrospect, I had put this person above God in my life & had made her an idol. God used John 21: 15-23 to call “me back to God's self & back to ministry” regardless of what this woman did in her life.

JOHN 21:19 - FOLLOW ME:

- What exactly does “following Christ” look like to you this morning?
- How do we manifest “following Christ” day in & day out?
- And does following Christ look during the hard times of our lives?
- And how do you define “hard times” in your life?

When you say, “I’m having a hard time in my life” what does that look like?

--*Life circumstances* (finances, job/job loss, health concerns, personal wellness, education)

--*Global situations/concerns* (Health care, partisan politics, global warming, natural disasters)

--*Relational Concerns* (Life partner/significant other, family of origin/choice concerns, aging parents, children & grandchildren)

NEW TESTAMENT READING – REVELATION 21: 1-6:

Today’s reading from the book of Revelation is a Scripture of promise regarding the Sovereignty of God & the hope of something better in the midst of hard times – however, you define “hard times”.

As many of you know, I was in Mississippi from April 15-27 because my Dad was rushed to the hospital April 14 for what we came to learn was congestive heart failure. I won’t bore you with all the details because I’m still sorting that out for myself. Essentially, my Dad was so sick that nothing the doctors could do would change the reality that he was dying. He passed away peacefully early Saturday morning, April 24, 2010.

As you may imagine the past 2 weeks have been hard AND wonderful. This time has been bittersweet AND peaceful. And in the midst of hard times, God was as close to my Dad & our entire family as the air we’re all breathing. Was it hard? Yes. Was God’s grace sufficient? Yes. Was God’s timing impeccable? Yes. And for all of that I am eternally grateful & in the coming weeks/months – as I am able, I’ll share more about those moments of grace.

For today, however, I point us all back to the promises of God – on this 5th Sunday of Easter – from *Revelation 21*.

- New heaven/new earth: A better version of our best imaginings!
- God’s home is among mortals – among us!
- Wipe tears from our eyes, death, mourning, crying & pain will be no more! (And all I can say about that is “Bring it!”)☺
- God is making ALL things new! And it has already been done!

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION:

In closing, I share one snippet of a conversation I had with my Dad during my first week with him. April 20, a Tuesday, had been a hard day & we had nearly lost him. He woke up around 4 PM that afternoon & asked for a cup of coffee. That next day, he & I were talking & he said, “I nearly left this place, yesterday!” He then went on to say that he wasn’t scared because he’d already been to heaven once – back in 1987 when his appendix ruptured.

So, I asked him what heaven looked like & he said, **“It was the pretty thing I’d ever seen!” It was clean & bright & filled with light!” He said it was the most beautiful place!**

So...in this moment, if you are grieving the death of a partner, a mother, a father, a child, a friend or any loved one, I invite you to join me in taking comfort in the promises of Revelation 21 & the testimony of someone who had glimpses of heaven. Amen.