

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
10:30 AM Worship – Sunday, May 4, 2025

SILENT PREPARATION

One night in New York, on Broadway, the great star Mary Martin was preparing to go on stage, as she had 1000 times before, in Rodgers & Hammerstein's South Pacific. Just before she took stage, a note was handed to her. The letter was signed by Oscar Hammerstein, who was – that evening – on his death bed. The note was short. It simply said: "Dear Mary, A bell's not a bell until you ring it. A song's not a song until you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love til you give it away."

And so it was in Jesus' words to Peter: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep!"

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Most gracious God, who spoke your Word to Simon son of John,
on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias;
and to Saint John, in exile on the Island of Patmos:

Speak to us this day through the reading and hearing
of your Holy Word,
that we, too, may be your chosen instruments,
called to bring your name before the peoples and nations
of our day.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 30

This morning's first reading is the 30th Psalm.

*In it, the psalmist has taken pride in his prosperity,
but – after falling on hard times – calls upon the LORD.*

And the LORD – then – restores the psalmist's joy!

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.

O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."

By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication:
"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?"

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!"

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

John 21:1-19

*Our reading from John's Gospel is – effectively –
a prologue to what has gone before.*

Remember how John Chapter 20 ends:

*"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,
which are not written in this book.*

*But these are written so that you may come to believe
that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
and that – through believing –
you may have life in his name."*

*Now – in chapter 21 – the gospel writer provides an account –
of the impact of Jesus' resurrection – on his closest followers.....*

After these things,

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias,
and he showed himself in this way.

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.

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.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach,
but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?"
They answered him, "No."

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.

That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"
When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord,
he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off,
and jumped into the sea.

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.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there,
with fish on it, and bread.

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."
So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore,
full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them,
and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

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.

Jesus came and took the bread, and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples –
after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,
"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"
He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."
Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."
Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?"
And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything;
you know that I love you."
Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger,
you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished.
But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands,
and someone else will fasten a belt around you,
and take you where you do not wish to go."

(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

After this he said to him, "Follow me."

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

“The Empty Net Syndrome”

Well, it had been a rough night for the party of seasoned fishermen.
“That night they caught nothing” – so says John, in verse 3.

Nada.... Zip.... Zilch..... Rien..... Not a single fish.

It had to be especially humiliating for Peter, effectively their leader.

After all, he was a professional fisherman — or had been,
before he began following Jesus up and down the land.

The repetitive motion of throwing a small, weighted net off one side of the boat –
and slowly pulling it in, hand over hand – was second nature to him.
He could have done it in his sleep.

And, you can bet Peter knew all the prime fishing spots, too.

The little fishing villages – that hug the shore of the Sea of Galilee –
were his home turf.

But this night? Nada.

Indeed, it’s a bit of a mystery why Peter – and the others –
decided to go back to fishing after they’d seen — and even touched —
that is, the risen Christ.

But – in fairness to them, Jesus is not so easy to follow –
in these post-resurrection days.

He’s with them one moment – and gone the next.

He’s a hard man to pin down, this risen Savior!

But – on the other hand –
perhaps it is not so strange that they would go back to fishing.

It’s what they knew.

And, people did not frequently change careers in biblical times –
the way that we do today.

Indeed, the very concept of a career – as something you choose –
was foreign to them.

If you were a man, and had a trade – like fishing –
it was likely that your father had done the very same thing.

There were no banks – to offer start-up financing –
for the purchase of boats and nets.

Rather, you inherited the tools of the trade from your father.

And he had – very likely – inherited them from his old man.

James and John – the sons of Zebedee –
are among those fishing with Peter that day.

And, all three have something in common:
the experience of being called by Jesus. (Matthew 4:19)
“Follow me,
and I will make you fishers of people,” Jesus said.

They – then – got up and followed, without a word,
probably surprising even themselves.

But here they are again, back in the fishing boat.
Time to get back to the nets.

Except the fish aren’t cooperating.

But wait ... there’s a guy standing on the shoreline, a hundred yards away,
who seems to have an idea what to do.

They can barely see him in the early-morning gloom,
as he cups his hands to his mouth,

And, he shouts out the nosy question –
that those who love fishing must patiently endure:
“Catching anything?”

Well, that's not exactly what he says.

"You don't have any fish, do you?" is more like it.

(And how does he know?)

Glumly they return their answer: "Not a one."

So, is his question a sarcastic dig or cutting criticism?

It's probably more sympathetic than that, because –
 when he shouts back something –
 about casting their net on the other side of the boat –
 they what he says – without question!

And then: Bingo!

In one cast, they've just caught a whole night's haul!

The net's so full – teeming with fish – that they can't even haul it in.

The best they can do is tie it off, put their oars in the water,
 and pull towards shore – dragging the bulging net behind them.

Their nets had been empty.

Surely, we have experienced times like that —
 times when what we've always done
 just doesn't seem to be working anymore.

And, it's times like those when we find ourselves
 doing what's said to be the definition of insanity:
 repeating the same action – over and over,
 but expecting a different result.

But, the thing about fishing is that – sometimes – repetition works!

Sometimes a little persistence is all we need.

And, that's one of the reasons why recreational fishing – with a rod and reel –
is so addictive;

that's why anglers are so eager to keep repeating those motions.

Just one more cast. Maybe it will be different ...

But – bringing this back home –
is there something in your life right now,
causing your nets to come back empty?

Is it something to do with work?

Or – maybe – retirement hasn't turned out quite the way we'd imagined?

[I'm back.....]

Maybe you're still young, and in school,
and you hate your place in a pecking order –
that you just can't seem to bust out of.

Or – maybe – it's a close family relationship — even a marriage —
that has grown cold over time,
and you don't know how to breathe life back into it.

Maybe it's the question of Christian faith, itself.

It reliably brought you strength – and comfort – in the past.

But – now – you're not so sure.

And, the net comes back empty – no matter how many times you cast it.

Sometimes, Christians can get all caught up in the works-righteousness thing —
the conviction that we have to save ourselves —
through hard work, and persistence.

That's what seems to be going on in our passage from John's Gospel —
as Peter and the others just keep casting their nets — again and again.

But God works in mysterious ways:

Those guys are just fishing.
They aren't looking for Jesus.
But they don't have to.
Jesus finds them!

And — when Peter finally realizes that it is Jesus — standing on the shore,
he does the strangest thing.

As verse 7 tells us,
“When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord,
he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off,
and jumped into the sea.”

There's something odd about that. Who puts clothes on to go swimming?

But that's not really what's going on here.

The Greek is hard to translate into English.

A literal translation — which is what we have here — sounds bizarre.

But most biblical scholars agree that —
rather than saying Peter is out there, fishing in the buff —
something no observant Jew would ever do —
the Greek really means that he's been stripped down to a loincloth.

Very practical garb — for someone handling soaking wet nets.

So – when Peter realizes it’s Jesus standing there, on the sand –
he grabs his tunic, pulls it on, and jumps into the water.

That’s what you’d do – if you wanted to get to shore with your clothes –
but need to keep your limbs free to swim.

Of course, Peter could have just jumped into the water –
wearing only his loincloth,

But, the fact – that he takes his tunic with him –
says something important about his state of mind.

Now that he has seen Jesus,
Peter may know that he’s not going back to the fishing boat, ever again.

He’s done with that.

He’s leaving his old fisherman-self behind –
and throwing in his lot with his Lord – and master – once again.

Except for that fishing-for-people thing, of course.

Now, that could not have been the easiest thing to do –
because Peter and Jesus had some unfinished business.

Looking back – at Peter’s three denials –
they did not part on the best of terms.

But Jesus will take care of it. He will make it right.

Here – in the Epilogue to his Gospel –
John takes pains to tell us that Jesus has a little cookfire going –
there on the beach,

And he’s grilling a few fish.
“Come and have breakfast!” he says to them,
a greeting as ordinary, as it is inviting.

The whole scene calls to mind something that happened earlier in John's gospel.

It happened in a spot not far from this very stretch of beach,
and we know the story:

A hungry crowd gathered alongside the Sea of Galilee,
and there was no way the disciples had enough food to feed them.

They only had five tiny loaves of bread – and two smoked fish.

But Jesus told them to start dividing up the food, and — surprise —
it was enough to feed a multitude!

Same spot, or very nearly so.

Same menu: bread and fish.

Whenever Jesus Christ starts handing out food —
whether by the lakeshore or at the Lord's table —
he does so in mind-boggling abundance!

And, John provides us with a another, little detail –
that may seem incidental –
but is central to what is about to happen.

John tells us it is a charcoal fire.

The Greek word he uses – for “charcoal fire” – b
occurs only one other time in the whole New Testament.

[Can you guess where that is?

If you can, you win today's Bible trivia prize.]

It occurs in the scene – when Peter denied Jesus the first time.

It was a dark, bone-chilling night.

Peter was stumbling through the streets and alleyways –
of the unforgiving city –
when he came upon a charcoal fire in a brazier.

Several people were standing around it – in the gloom,
warming their hands over the flame.

Peter – then – stepped up and joined them.

And – as he was rubbing his hands together –
rather like Pilate did, when he was washing his hands of Jesus —
one of his newfound companions said,
“Hey, I know you.
You were with the Galilean rabbi they just arrested!”

But Peter said, “No, I wasn’t. It was someone else.”

Twice more he said that.

Two more acts of betrayal – before the cock crowed.

So now – as Peter stands there on the beach –
looking into the eyes of his Lord and Master –
the pungent aroma – of burning charcoal – floods his nostrils.

Now, the human sense of smell is a powerfully evocative thing.

And – for Peter – it is – unmistakably – the scent of betrayal.

So, such are the memories that occur to Peter –
throughout that breakfast on the beach.

On the one hand, he is overjoyed to be with Jesus once again.

But – on the other hand – his joy is far from complete –
because of that nagging memory,
wafting its way – on swirling ribbons of charcoal smoke.

But Jesus has it covered.

At some point – toward the end of the meal – Jesus’ eyes meet Peter’s.

And – then – the risen Lord says the most extraordinary thing:
“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

The two of them repeat the exchange two more times.

It is ordinary conversation, but, it is also a sort of liturgy.

So, is it an accident that the threefold formula
corresponds to the three times Peter denied him?

No.

Here – with infinite patience and grace –
the Lord is walking Peter back –
through his greatest regrets, and most heart-searing memories.

What is happening here is the healing of memories –
which is among the most profound – and life-changing – healings of all.

The feed-my-lambs liturgy,
gives Peter the chance to live that episode of his life over —
and to make it right, this time.

So, what is it that is making our nets come up empty?

There’s a real possibility of a hole in our net,
a ragged tear in the slender, knotted cords.

And – because of that flaw – our net can hold no fish.

So, what we have to do – by God’s grace –
is to stop trying to fish, and go, mend our netd.

We have to sew up that hole.

Only it’s not something we can do by ourselves.

We need someone else to do it for us.

We need an expert fisherman, a true mender of nets.

What we need is Jesus Christ.

He is the One who will listen – with infinite patience – any shame and regret.

He is the One who will take our pain upon himself.

He is the One who — by his amazing grace —
will walk us back through whatever we’ve done – or failed to do –
and make us whole again.

“Do you love me more than these?” – Jesus wants to know.

“Yes, Lord, you know that we love you.”

“Then, go do the thing I’ve called you to do. Feed my sheep.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (Unison)**

Pastor

One: Why is Jesus called “Christ,” that is, the “anointed one”?

All: Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

One: But why are you called a Christian?

All: Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures. Amen.

***CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

Is your net coming up empty – even after years of successful fishing?

Sometimes we need to lay down the rod and reel,
check our bait,
try a new lure,
or move to a different spot.

Jesus helped Peter haul in a record load of fish.

And he can help us, too, if our nets need mending.

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....