

“Going in Circles”
Reflections on John 21-1-14
Easter Sunday 2010

Do not know why I try so hard on Easter Sunday; one wants to make sure everything is perfect and goes off without a hitch and then the Paschal Candle blows out during the processional as you are saying, “The Light of Life can never be extinguished.” I now know how my mom felt during all those major holidays when her high-falutin’ cousins from Oklahoma would come a visitin’ and everything from we three boys to the fake flowers on the dining room would have to be just perfect. Her first mistake was thinking we three brothers could ever be perfect; just think brother number one tripping brother number three while he is carrying the silver platter of turkey, and turkey legs go flying all over Aunt Macey’s giblets, and then imagine brother number three chasing brother number one with the carving knife and mother chasing all of us shoutin’ color metaphors...

But I digress....Easter Sunday comes every year, and I was reminded this year of just how difficult it is for preachers. Saturday’s paper had a stupendous article on Easter sermon preparations, and how it is difficult for preachers to come up with new and creative things to say about a story two thousand years old. One preacher asked his staff what he should preach on, and his staff, all in unison, said, “the Resurrection? Duh!” The article went on to describe all the frantic late Saturday night sermon writing as desperate preachers struggled to find something to say the next morning. As I sat in my chair drinking – my Diet Coke – I had one of them there epiphanies, I HAD NOT THOUGHT OF AN EASTER SERMON! In the midst of all the Holy Week services sermonizing totally slipped my mind!

I guess I just didn’t want to preach on the same old story. I get so tired of hearing how it was the WOMEN who came to the tomb and found it empty. I get so tired of hearing how it was the WOMEN whom the angel greeted with the joyous news. I get so tired of hearing how it was the WOMEN to whom the Risen Jesus first made his appearance. I don’t want to talk about the WOMEN this year. As a matter of fact I do not want to talk about Easter or Easter Eggs.

I want to talk about Christmas and Christmas trees!

Growing up in the great city of Cecil – okay, we only had 99 people and one church, but that church was awesome; especially our Christmas Shindig and Hootenanny – Santa Claus, candy, presents, and the disastrous Christmas pageant that we kids always managed to screw up in some way. Yet the best part was the Christmas tree. Those are tall ceilings in that sanctuary my friends, tall ceilings, and it was always left up to a group of us kids to go out and get the tree. The bigger, the better, was our philosophy because we wanted it to fill at least a third of the sanctuary. Cecil didn’t have fancy fir trees or sassy spruces – we had cedar. We always hiked deep into the woods to find the tallest and fattest trees, and it required a minimum of three of us to carry that sucker out. Two of us would have to crawl inside the body of the tree and hold the trunk above our heads as far as our arms could stretch (the branches would just barely scap the ground then – the bigger, the better you see) and the third person would tie a rope to their waist and to the trunk of the tree in order to guide us out. It was usually cloudy, cold, and wintry days when we went Christmas tree hunting, and the passage of time grinds down the closest of

friendships. You see, in any given year it would take us hours to find our way out of those woods. We always seemed to get stuck walking in circles. The two “tree-huggers” would stop, peek out of the branches, and ask, “Haven’t we passed this way before,” and inevitably the leader would say, “Course not, don’t be stupid.” Then someone would point out the freshly cut tree trunk poking out of the ground, and then the unwarranted, unsolicited advice from one of the “tree-hugging” wags would spew forth, “I think we need to take a left at the creek this time instead of a right.” And you really want to reply, “Listen cousin, my grade point is countless gradations above yours; that’s why the rope is tied to my waist – you couldn’t walk a Christmas tree out of these woods even if the Star of Bethlehem was guiding you!” Some would say new elections were held – I say it’s a coup-de-tat – but new leaders would be appointed and we would take that left only to come back hours later to that tree trunk poking out of the ground.

Did you know that it is a scientific fact that without the Sun and Moon to guide us we humans have the tendency to endlessly walk in circles? I could have used that knowledge to ward off those vicious slanders concerning “not-being-able-to-find-my-way-out-of-a-paper-sack.” We naturally walk in circles when we have lost our way. Fascinating! I guess when lost we cling to the familiar and the unchanged because it is more comfortable.

This is all fascinating because it fits so well with the Resurrection story this morning. This one takes place after the Risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, and after Peter and the Beloved Disciple hear the women tell the story inspiring both to sprint to the tomb only to discover it empty. Chalking these reports up to that “idle” chatter women are prone to chattering about (just seeing if you are paying attention) Peter leaves bewildered and confused. Today’s story takes place at the Sea of Tiberius, near Galilee, and near where Jesus’ ministry begins. Peter, Andrew, James and John have walked in a circle. The betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus have thrown them for a loop (pardon the sermon pun) and in their confusion and fear they return to their old life – fishing. I love the flourish the Gospel adds, not only have they returned to their old life, but also they are fishing where they have always fished, and they are casting their nets to the same side of the boat as they have always cast (you always cast your nets toward the shore). It really is a pathetic opening scene, these four in the same old boat where Jesus first found them. They have literally come full circle because they are completely lost now that they think Jesus is dead.

I imagine many of us can relate to their dilemma; life throws us for a loop and in our bewilderment and confusion we become trapped walking in circles, forever returning to the place from whence we started. We cling to the staid and comfortable, continually stumbling into the ruts of the past because they are so familiar. Think about it for a moment: bad relationships, loveless marriages, dead-end careers and lifeless pursuits we know lead us in circles. Maybe it is our intellectual or spiritual lives that seem stuck in one big endless circle endlessly repeating the same old boring things. “History repeats itself” is not some trite phrase; there is literally “nothing new under the sun” as we discover when we explore history; going in circles seems to be our fate.

The last thing we seek is advice, because there is nothing worse than the reminder of going in circles than for others to tell us to try a different way, especially when that “different way” seems so counter-intuitive. This is the part of the story we almost expect for here comes the unwarranted, unsolicited advice.

A stranger yells to the fishermen, “Cast your nets to the right side,” to the deeper end of the sea. I am sure these professional fishermen wonder about this bit of unsolicited – and unconventional – advice, but they have been trying all night and repeated failure does sometime inspire a desire for trying something else. They cast the net to the right of the boat – out towards the sea – and in so doing they quickly discover their net swells with fish. There are so many fish – one hundred fifty three very large ones – that they are unable to pull in the net. Their unconventional catch threatens to swamp the boat.

Perhaps it’s the extraordinary haul hinting of a miracle, or perhaps the abundance of fish sparks memories of a certain miracle when crowds of thousands were fed by a few loaves and fish, but the beloved Disciple peers again at the stranger with the strange advice on the seashore and he shouts, “It is the Lord!” Quickly putting on his clothes (hey, I do not profess to know why grown men do the things they do when only surrounded by other grown men, but yes, nude fishing seems to be all the rage around Galilee, and yes, Peter is naked in the boat, you want me to read it to you?) Peter leaps from the boat and swims to shore. As the other disciples come ashore they find a charcoal fire with fish cooking. Jesus invites them to eat breakfast.

I am not here to debate the “Resurrection;” eight years of philosophy and theology convinces me that you will never be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt concerning whether these events took place. Christianity is something that has to be experienced not debated. But I will say this, if you open your eyes to history, even to the daily progression of life, you might notice that we are going in circles. What you believe about Jesus is up to you, but the one thing you cannot deny is that all of life, all of history, changed because of this one man’s life, and we as Christians believe that Jesus breaks the circular cycle of living and now points us towards a great culmination and fulfillment of the dreams of Heaven. The cycle of history is being broken as God through Christ moves us towards the day when there will be no more crying or pain. And like those disciples on that seashore so many centuries ago, God is waiting to break the cycle we find ourselves trapped.

So this morning, if you find your life going in circles, if you are stuck and ready to try something different, I invite you to come experience the new life that awaits all of us because of the Resurrection; I invite you to cast life’s nets in a new direction and experience the faith, the Dream, and the Resurrection.

Merry Christmas...and happy Easter too!