

**THE NEVER ENDING STORY (John 21)**  
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One of the images that we have been working with this SALT season is life as a “journey.” This image is not something that we invented out of thin air. As we argued in our opening session, it is an image that may be as old as literature itself. We find the journey motif in the Gilgamesh Epic; we find it in Homer’s Odyssey; and we find it in Hebrew Scripture itself, in the journeys of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. We see it in the classic story of the Exodus, where the Hebrew people are led out from Egypt into the Promised Land. We find it in Deutero-Isaiah as that anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile encourages his people with Yahweh’s message of return. It is a story that recurs in Pilgrim’s Progress as Christian travels toward the Celestial City. In a sense, the journey is an image that dominates our own national heritage. As a nation, and often for worse rather than for better, we have drawn upon the biblical image of leaving the past and going to the promised land in order to describe European migrations to the “New World.” We journey from sea to shining sea, crossing plain, mountain, and desert to reach the Edenic fecundity of the Pacific Coast. The journey is an image that often nourishes our personal histories as much as it governs our national history, and it is an apt metaphor for our lives of faith as well. It certainly fits the Gospel of John. For in this gospel Jesus makes three journeys to Jerusalem, and the final one sets the stage for his journey back to “the Father.”

A number of years ago I took my six year-old son to Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center nestled high in the east slope of the Pacific Northwest Cascade mountains, where I led Bible studies for two weeks. My son and I did a lot of hiking while we were there, and I enjoyed seeing how far he could walk, what piqued his interest along the way, and imagined what parts of his many hikes he might remember a few years later. Early one Sunday morning we walked with a friend four and a half miles up Railroad Creek to Hart Lake. We fished for awhile, and like the disciples in John 21, caught nothing. So shortly after lunch we started back to Holden Village. As one might expect, our friend headed out first and soon disappeared. With my son Ben as the leader, we began going slower and slower. He would dawdle here and there, and then begin to complain, “I just can’t go any farther, Dad. Can you carry me?”

At that point I said I would lead the way, and so I slipped by him and picked up the pace a little bit. He was fine for another forty-five minutes or so and then the complaining began again.

“Oh, I just can’t go any farther!”

We started placing bets on who would finish first, turning the hike into a competition; a little game. I bet him that he couldn’t finish the hike by himself, but that if he did, he could have my coupon for a free ice cream cone at the end. That did the trick. As it turned out, when we got within a quarter of a mile of Holden Village Ben ran the rest of the way to ice creamery. He beat me there by at least five minutes. As I walked that last quarter mile I knew it wouldn’t be too

many years before he would be leading the entire journey, and encouraging me with “Just a little further, Dad. I know you can do it!”

As we have seen from our study of John 13, an important development in the second half of the Fourth Gospel is the appearance of the “disciple whom Jesus loved”—that ideal follower who becomes Jesus’ companion on the way to the cross. This character’s journey with Jesus marks a shift from the multiple images of faith in the first half of the book (Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind), to a more dominant, singular image of faith in the second half. But strangely, this anonymous character appears suddenly in chapter 13 with almost no forewarning. And the typical scholarly questions of the last hundred years have focused on his opaque identity: Who is he? Is he a he? Do we know his name? And what is his connection to Jesus? Whoever this person is, he seems to be a torchbearer, a guide for readers, leading them forward into a nebulous future.

All of us have had experiences in our lives where we have been leaders, guides, or mentors for other people. As with my son on our hike to Hart Lake, we encourage others and lead them by example. But there always comes a time when the ones we lead or teach gain more and more independence and grow into the task we have mentored them for. We may even eventually become dependent upon them; with them becoming the guide. One of the joys of being a child in a large family is seeing your siblings grow up and develop into adults, and being able to be friends with them. Or having one’s own children grow up and finding that after years of mentoring them, it is possible to be friends with them as equals, learning from them as much as you once taught them.

In our careers we may have had the experience of training someone for a job that we were soon going to be leaving, and have had to deal with our ensuing fears and anxieties. We have found ourselves asking, “Will this person do as good a job as I have done? Will the office—the company survive my leaving?” We create a niche for ourselves. We practically become part of the woodwork, we’ve been around so long. We become institutions just by ourselves. Now the torch is about to be passed. We are leaving the job and moving on to something else. The question is, will the people coming along behind us carry on in the same tradition? Will they work as hard and as creatively as we have? Will they be as committed to the future of the company as we were? How will the future play out?

I think this same sense of anxiety underlies the interaction between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John 13-21. The Fourth Gospel is the only Gospel that mentions the Beloved Disciple, and he first appears in John 13:23, “reclining next to Jesus.” In fact, he seems to be positioned precisely *between* Peter and Jesus, for Peter motions to the Beloved Disciple to “ask Jesus of whom he was speaking” (John 13:24). Thus, the first time the Beloved Disciple appears in John, he is associated with Peter and Jesus. The second time Peter and this anonymous disciple are mentioned is in John 18:15-16. Here the term “Beloved Disciple” is not used, but rather “the other disciple.” But since the terms “Beloved Disciple” and “another disciple” are used interchangeably in John 20:2 and 20:8, it appears that we are talking about the same person. John 18:15-16 describes the scene in the high priest’s courtyard, where Peter denies Jesus three times (18:17-18, 25-

27). Here Peter is found standing near a charcoal fire, warming himself. This is not an incidental setting, because there will be one more time when Peter is at a charcoal fire. That time it will be after the resurrection (John 21:9), when Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” (21:15-17).

The third time the Beloved Disciple is mentioned, he is at the foot of the cross with Jesus and Jesus’ mother (19:25-27). All the other male disciples have fled—even Peter, who had once vowed that he would lay down his life for Jesus (13:36-37). But he is a witness to Jesus’s death. The fourth and fifth times the Beloved Disciple is mentioned he is linked once again with Peter. In John 20, early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed, and sees that the stone has been removed. So she runs and finds Simon Peter and the other disciple—“the one whom Jesus loved”—and says to them “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they’ve laid him” (20:2). In the ensuing footrace to the tomb, the “other disciple” outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. He bends down to look in, sees the linen wrappings lying there, but does not go in. However, Simon Peter comes up behind him and goes into the tomb first. But strangely it is the “other disciple” who sees and believes since “as yet he did not understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead” (20:9).

The fifth and final place where these two disciples are connected is in chapter 21, the lakeside scene in Galilee. In this appendix-like conclusion to the book, the disciples are far away from Jerusalem, the location of the previous resurrection appearances. Peter decides to go fishing, and after fishing all night and catching nothing, a mysterious man on the shore tells them to “Cast your net on the right side of the boat” (21:6). The fishermen follow the man’s strange command, and end up catching 153 fish.

Due to this surprising experience, the beloved disciple surmises that the stranger on the shore must be “the Lord.” But it is Peter who acts first by jumping into the water and swimming to shore. As on Easter morning, Peter outraces the disciple whom Jesus loves, and when he gets to the beach, he discovers that Jesus has built a charcoal fire and is already cooking fish. What follows is a conversation between Peter and Jesus where Peter’s relationship with Jesus is restored (cf. Jesus’ three-fold question “Do you love me?” with Peter’s previous three-fold denial (13:36-38; 18:15-18, 25-27), and where Peter is charged with the pastoral mission to “Feed my sheep.” The book finally ends with Jesus telling Peter to “Follow me,” and with Peter continuing to ask questions.

The fact that these two characters are so often paired together raises a question in the minds of scholars: Is it possible that the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple reflects an early Christian struggle for power between these two individuals or between two early Christian communities? In a sense this question is what drove Raymond Brown to write his book entitled The Community of the Beloved Disciple (see the bibliography, below). But Brown argues that the depiction of Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John 13-21 reflects not so much a competition between two historical personages at the time of Jesus, as a late first century struggle between two different Christian communities: the Johannine community and the Petrine

community. While I am not particularly convinced by Raymond Brown's argument, one can surely agree with him in saying that there is a peculiar dynamic that develops between these two characters. One could go so far as to say that there seems to be a certain hierarchical relationship between the two. For in order to communicate with Jesus, Peter must first speak to the Beloved Disciple (13:23-24), and in order to enter the High Priest's house—where Jesus has been taken after his arrest—Peter must tag along with the "other disciple" (18:16).

Now this is doubly strange in a book where Jesus calls Simon "Peter" (Rock), the very first time he meets him (1:42), and where the Beloved Disciple doesn't appear in the story until the Last Supper. The reader is not told why Simon is named "Peter" in this Gospel (cf. 1:40-41 and Matthew 16:18-20!), yet he is the only Johannine character to get a nickname. Does he have the nickname because later on Peter will be the one to ask Jesus the perfect question, "To whom shall we go? You only have the words of life" (6:68-69)? Perhaps. But we can't be sure. However, with this question on his lips, Peter seems to be headed in the right direction: He is one of the few still following Jesus (6:66-67). Peter is a character who seems to have his head screwed on right—at least until Jesus prophesies his denials (13:36-38).

Now if we look at the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple simply on a story level, without speculating about the historical origins of their apparent rivalry, we find that issues relating to discipleship and the cross are central to their narrative roles. It is in the very context of Jesus' betrayal that the Beloved Disciple first appears. And the second time the two appear together Peter is busy denying he was one of Jesus's disciples. Because of this motif of following and betrayal, I do not think it is insignificant that the Beloved Disciple is anonymous—and yet designated a "disciple." Because this is the key element here: the closest disciple to Jesus *is anyone who follows him all the way to the cross*. So rather than asking the unanswerable academic question: "Who is this person?" We might do better to ask: "What does this character tell us about our own journeys of faith? And "What does this character tell us about the life of discipleship?" I believe that these two questions will take us spiritually much further than any pursuit of the Beloved Disciple's "actual historical identity." So there is a reason for keeping the Beloved Disciple anonymous. For this person's anonymity makes it possible for anybody to view himself or herself as the Beloved Disciple. This is the kind of person any of us can be, because the person *is anonymous*: John or Jane Doe Christian. You—or me.

Moreover, I believe that the peculiar "doubled ending" to the book (20:30-31; 21:1-25) is intimately connected to the doubled characterization of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Contrary to what many biblical scholars believe, I do not think that John 21 is an appendix that is just sort of added to the book after the death of the "Beloved Disciple." First of all, John 21 has a chiasmic structure that ties it together (see handout). Secondly, the contrast between the end of John 20 and the beginning of 21 is similar to the contrast between the end of John 5 and the beginning of John 6 (see handout). Thirdly, and more importantly, John 21 is theologically crucial to the overall purpose of the book because it appropriately completes the author's dynamic view of faith. If we go back to the beginning of

the book, one of Jesus' first commands is, "Follow me" (1:43). Not surprisingly, at the end of the book Jesus repeats the same command: "Follow me" (21:22). Interestingly, this is the only gospel where the same command is repeated at the end (cf. Mark 1:17; 8:34).

Now when we go back to the beginning of the book, we find that only in the Fourth Gospel do the disciples begin their journey with Jesus by making profound confessions of faith. In Mark, by way of contrast, it takes Peter eight chapters before he says anything significant about Jesus (8:29). But in John 1, the first followers of Jesus exclaim, "You are the Christ!" (1:41), and "You are the son of God!" (1:49), or "You are the king of Israel!" (1:49). On what basis do these sojourners with Jesus make such bald assertions? These kind of confessional statements ought to be the stuff that comes at the end of the book (20:30-31) after they've spent years journeying with Jesus, or when they have just witnessed a powerful miracle (11:27)! So why does the reader need John 2-21 when the disciples have said everything they need to say all in their first two days with Jesus? Isn't the "confession of faith" all that Christians need? Jesus says "Come and see" and "Follow me," and the seers and followers spend less than twenty-four hours with him before they are mouthing profound confessions of faith. Isn't this what Christianity is all about? Instant soup, instant pudding, instant discipleship. Just say the words "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and you are home free. Bingo. You got the answer right. Go to the head of the class. Graduate.

But that is not the way this gospel plays out its spiritual journey. After traveling with Jesus for two or three years, having seen great signs and suffered extreme antagonism, we finally come to John 20:30-31. And the last few words of the narrator impact our senses: "Now these things that are written in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing you might have life in his name." But instead of an ending, the author/narrator gives us a whole other chapter!

In reading John 21 a couple things stand out: the first is the role of Peter in the community of believers. Jesus trusts Peter with a particular community and a particular nurturing role: "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs," Jesus says (21:15-17). But even more crucial than Peter's role in the community is the command that Jesus makes at the end, to "Follow me." This is the second thing that stands out in John 21. And it stands out in part because it is one of the very first things Jesus says in the book. It is very easy to make that confession. It doesn't take much effort in this book to mouth Christian words. Like the demons in Mark's Gospel, the first followers say "Hey, we know who you are! You're the Son of God!" But it will take a lot longer for them to recognize the significance of their words and put that confession together with their journey, their life of following that leads to the foot of the cross.

So what does it mean in this Gospel to put the words "you are the Christ" together with a certain kind of behavior, a certain kind of action, a type of following? Where is the confession of faith in John 21? Where is the journey taking Peter and the Beloved Disciple in this chapter? One of the things that I like about the end of this book is that we don't know what direction Jesus is moving.

Is he walking along the lakeside? Away from the lake? Toward the lake? We are not told. But the one thing we do know is that Peter is looking the wrong direction. He's looking back over his shoulder, asking questions: "What about this person coming along behind me? You've given me a task, and I'll do fine. I'll tend the sheep and feed the lambs, just like you told me to. But what about this guy, Jesus? What about this person who's coming on behind us? This Beloved Disciple has sort of pushed me off of center stage in this gospel. He has always been pushing his way in next to you and stealing the limelight. So what about him, Jesus? What is his task? His role?" Peter is following, but he is looking over his shoulder, in the wrong direction. If he is not careful he's going to trip over a stone or a rock—a "petros," and fall down.

There is a sense of transition here at the end of John's gospel. For here, in the unknown future, we have to learn again what it means to take that confession of faith and live it out in the world; in the experience of a day-by-day following. For now the confession we make as believers is not simply a statement of faith—I went through catechism, the rite of initiation, through all the steps that I need to go through to become a full voting member of the church—confirmation, new membership classes. I know the creed and the history of the denomination. But John 21 is not an addendum; not an appendix; not an afterthought. It is absolutely crucial to the author's purpose in writing. The book does not simply end with chapter 20:30-31. The confession of faith "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" is only spiritually transformative if it is connected to the experience of following to the foot of the cross—and beyond—to wherever the living Christ might lead us.