

AN INITIAL ENTHUSIASM

Between now and Palm Sunday, I want, insofar as I am able, to set before you the five major turning points in the life of the Apostle Peter. Peter is not a great thinker, or a great theologian like Paul. He is not a great organizer like James (the brother). He is not wealthy, like Levi, or a revolutionary like the other Simon, called the Zealot. Some of his best contributions are the result of his bungling. Despite the Roman Catholic insistence that Peter was the first Pope, in his lifetime Peter seems to consistently duck every official position of leadership. He blusters, puts his foot in his mouth, guesses wrong, and makes bad choices over and over. Yet he keeps learning, people love him, and, next to Jesus, he seems to be the greatest healer of the time (Paul is close). Nevertheless, while others are starting new churches, organizing feeding programs, holding great Councils, and carrying forth the work of the Kingdom, Peter just seems to “wander about” – encouraging, preaching, healing, visiting – but without specific aim or title or purpose. Yet his influence and impact are enormous.

While it is probable that most of the disciples were married, we know for sure that Peter was married. The first hint is in the very first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. (Mark 1:30; Matthew 9:5; Luke 4:38) It is very difficult to heal someone’s mother-in-law if they are not married. It is difficult enough, even if they *are* married. It delights me to know that being married is no excuse for failing to follow Jesus. I hope it delights you too. It also delights me to know that the first Pope was married, and that celibacy was a mistake we added later in the game. I have always been sad that Peter’s wife did not write an account of how this whole business looked from her perspective. But we do not know her name. We do not know if she was home taking care of the children when Peter first joined Jesus’ Movement. We only know that she traveled with Peter in his later years. (I Corinthians 9:5)

In any case, many of us can identify more easily with Peter than with any other major player in the early church – at least at first. More importantly, Peter goes through major phases – major turning points – in his spiritual awakening and development that are classic for us all. It is fun to track him, and see if that helps us to track

ourselves. Moreover, Peter makes it abundantly clear that conversion is not a one-time, one-dimensional experience. No matter how dramatic our first awakening, it is never the end – it is only the beginning of our pilgrimage. We keep getting converted, layer after layer. Once is not enough! If it is only once, that means we went back to sleep ... fell off the Path ... stopped following THE WAY. I think most of you know this. But large segments of current-day Christendom do not seem to know this. At least they do not talk or act as if they know it. That makes it doubly important for us to know and remember it.

My first two trips to Israel were accompanied by the same Jewish guide, Yacov (Jacob). He was sabre, born and raised in Israel, fought in the wars – the whole deal. Once, in the Galilee, the second year when we had come to know each other a little, we sat talking one evening after everyone else had gone to bed. He told me that three times in his career as a guide, members of Christian groups he was guiding had grabbed him unawares and forcibly baptized him against his will (once in the Jordan, twice in the ocean). Moreover, it had happened to many of his friends who were also guides. Yacov was very philosophical about it – just one of the hazards of the trade, he figured. I found it deeply offensive. Why would Christians behave this way? What did they suppose this would accomplish? Did they really think Jesus would appreciate such effrontery in His name? Did they actually believe this was “following Jesus” in attitude and intention and method? Of course, I know what really happened: They came to adore Yacov because he was such a wonderful guide, and they could not stand the thought that he was going to Hell. So they dunked him. Hazards of the trade, indeed. Is that really how it works? Is that really what conversion is about? Who is teaching Christians in our time to think and act in such ways? Yacov and I were talking that night because he had realized that our group was not like most he had traveled with, and it intrigued him. I was the first Christian, it seemed, who genuinely believed that he was not damned because he was Jewish. He sensed that our group did not believe this way either. “Why don’t we know that there are Christians like you folks?” he wanted to know. How could I tell him that “our brand” of Christians are afraid to speak of what they believe – or too busy to let their faith be known?

Peter's story is not told to us by or for itself. It comes to us in bits and pieces along the track of a much larger story. Fragments and anecdotes from his many years of ministry drift back to us from beyond the New Testament. From the New Testament itself, we get incidents and comments, mostly in passing. The focus is on Jesus. But Peter hangs around with Jesus. The bits and pieces mount up, and some of Peter's story unfolds. We discover that there is something very familiar about Peter. He could almost be somebody we know. He could even be us. Peter is a kind of prototype, a kind of model, for at least a large segment of those of us who try to follow Jesus.

Sorry for technical asides, but several names are used for Peter in the Bible: Simon, Symeon (Simeon), Cephas, and Peter. *Simon* is Greek for the Hebrew *Simeon* – as in Jacob's second son and one of the twelve tribes of Israel. That is Peter's real name: Simon son of Jonas (Jonah or, in Greek, John). But there are two Simons among the twelve disciples. Obviously one must be given a different name. So Jesus nicknames Simon *Cephas* (Aramaic, *Kephas*), which means "stone." The Greek equivalent is *Petros* – rock. Hence, Peter. Especially when Peter is referred to as Cephas, some modern readers miss the connection.

Peter's brother is Andrew, and they both come from Bethsaida, which means "house of fishing." Bethsaida is a suburb or village of Capernaum – Jesus' headquarters during His ministry.

The first major phase of Peter's spiritual awakening reveals a remarkable and essential change in his life. It is the only part of the story we will look at today. We could call it Peter's first conversion. If conversion means "to change," Peter certainly qualifies! We could title this first phase: FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. It is a period in which Peter's lifestyle, his direction, his goals, and his beliefs are all dramatically changed. As we just mentioned, he is even given a new name to go along with his very different life: Rock. The overall mood of this first period is that of an initial enthusiasm.

Let us take a quick look at Peter's first conversion. It has five ingredients, and they are classic. You can find the same five in the story of Moses, or Paul, or Jeremiah, or any of the great prototypes. Peter ends up being among them.

FIRST, Peter listened to the Word. He heard Jesus preaching. He did not just hear Jesus – he *heard* Jesus. Some of it was getting through. (Interesting that *Simon* means “hearing.”) We do not know much about Peter up to this point. He was a Jew and a Galilean fisherman, and he had a family to support. But conversions do not come out of nowhere. Peter seems to be part of a group of Galilean fishermen (including his brother Andrew and friend Philip) who were followers of John the Baptist. (John 1:40ff) So was Jesus, prior to His own conversion. Then Jesus was baptized and came into much greater awareness of His true identity and purpose. At the instigation of John the Baptist, word began to spread among his followers that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. The point is that Peter was already “religious,” in his way. It seems clear that he and Andrew (and probably James and John and Philip) had been baptized by John the Baptist. He knew Jesus, though probably not much about Him yet. There is always preparation and inclination and history prior to conversion. God chooses the willing. God does not straight-arm the unwilling. Contact with God changes us, to be sure. But however much we may protest or claim total surprise, in some way we were asking for it. Are *you* asking for it? For further contact with God? Most people are not ... and then they wonder why God leaves them pretty much alone.

In my own mind, I try to picture what Peter was like. I picture him in his own day and time, yet he also reminds me of some of the people I know today: hard-working, with a big heart, and usually good-humored. I am sure he had a temper too! I suspect that he was well-liked. I imagine him to have been a bit scornful of the larger religious establishment (since he was involved with the reformer, John the Baptist), but he was probably also a member of the synagogue in Capernaum. I imagine him telling jokes, arguing about politics, and having a lot of strong opinions about Romans, taxes, and corruption in high places. I see him as a person who loved children, and who did not mind going out of his way to help a neighbor. Then one day, Jesus borrowed his boat for a while so He could get offshore just far enough to talk to the people about the Kingdom of God.

The impression we get is that Peter heard a lot of religious truth that day which he already believed. Only, he heard it put together with authority and power and challenge like he had never heard it

before. Things he had sort of believed and sort of tried to practice suddenly turned into a full-blown invitation and a summons. Jesus talked about a Kingdom that was unseen but more real than what was seen – a thing God was doing that would literally change the world, and the very nature of reality. What Peter had been trying to make a part of his life was now asking to be his *whole* life – and he was getting a glimpse of how living for this Kingdom was LIFE itself, and the only life worth having.

Is that not what happens when people *hear* the Word? What we have always believed, at least vaguely, one day jumps into focus – moves from tenth place into first place – and displaces a lot of things in the process. Very simple, in a way. And totally profound. What we had merely tried to include in our lives as something nice or ethical or helpful suddenly takes us over – and we feel the presence of God in and around us, where before it had seemed more like theory, or maybe just humanity’s better side trying to come to the fore. In any case, Peter heard the Word.

SECOND, Peter has an experience of the power and benevolence of God toward him personally. Conversion is never theory alone – never just intellect. Conversion is always encounter, personal experience. Naturally, that has to come in some form, some “language” we can understand. Peter is a fisherman. He had fished all night with no luck, and suddenly his boat is overflowing with fish. That gets his attention. He knows fish and fishing, and this is not normal! It happened *to* him, and for him, and there is no mistaking the presence of an unseen power.

You probably don’t want me to remind you of this, but generally speaking, the flashy miracles that come for our personal benefit happen early in our Christian pilgrimage. They are *not* the point or purpose of the Kingdom. They reveal God’s presence and power and personal affection. After that is made clear, God moves on to more important matters. The miracles get deeper and more to the point, but they do not entertain quite as well, unless you are talking to other pilgrims.

In this case, Peter has probably dreamed his whole life of making such a catch. Now that it has happened, before this day is over he will walk away from it all. The power behind such a catch is

bigger than the catch itself. “That for which a thing is such, the thing itself is more such.”

THIRD, Peter is undone. Logically, Peter would be begging Jesus to come fish with him every day. But this is too big for logic. Peter begs Jesus to leave. The reaction is strange, but classic. Peter is awestruck and astonished. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” Peter cannot believe this has happened to him. As the significance strikes home, he is filled with the sudden, full realization of his own unworthiness. There is no way to live up to a personal visit and gift from the Lord of Creation. The honor is too high. It cannot be handled. We all want God ... until we discover that God is real and present. Then it is suddenly too much for us. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” (Get me out of here!) Strange, isn’t it? We complain because God does not reveal himself more often and more clearly – yet from God’s side, we turn off or go “tilt” at every slightest glimpse he tries to give us.

FOURTH, Peter is reassured and commissioned. Peter’s unworthiness and sinfulness are not disputed. No debate here. It is obviously true. Only, that is not the point or the issue. Peter has heard the Word, and he has experienced a taste of the Word. God cares about him. He is invited in. “Do not be afraid – come work for me.” That is crucial. Without the invitation to share in the task, the experience would have been fake. The world is full of counterfeit conversions. Every authentic first conversion comes with an assignment. If it comes without an assignment, then the experience is self-induced, or emotionally induced by others.

The FIFTH step is the acceptance of the invitation and the assignment. God always leaves the final decision to us. Sometimes, as with the rich young ruler, we turn it down. In Peter’s case (and in Andrew’s and James’ and John’s), the response is clear and definite: “*They left everything and followed him.*”

Perhaps we need to mention that “leaving everything to follow Him” is not essentially a physical phenomenon. The assignment is not always in a different place, nor is it always a different function. But we are always called to do things with a different motive and purpose, and with a new understanding of how it fits into the Kingdom’s goals. Whether or not the “outside” looks different, the “inside” is always a whole new world.

I invite you this Lent to walk with Peter. Get to know him, read up on him, look beneath the surface, compare your own Christian pilgrimage with his. And when you see the pattern clearly on the individual level, do not stop there. See if the pattern fits also when you apply it to your family, your friendships, your business, your church. If the pattern is right, it will hold true on any and every level.

Peter moves into his new life with characteristic enthusiasm. He is delighted to be with Jesus, and hungry to learn and do everything he can for the Kingdom. He is enamored with Jesus' powers, and he participates joyfully in Jesus' preaching and teaching missions. He asks a lot of dumb questions, like: "Why don't you call down fire from Heaven on their heads?" Or, "How many times do I have to forgive somebody?" Or, "Can I come to you across the water?" (He was not nicknamed "Rock" for nothing.) Partly for this very reason, Peter seems to learn faster than the others. His faith grows, and so does his love and loyalty for Jesus. At this point, Peter is a good illustration of the happy convert. Following Jesus is a lark, even though a very meaningful, deep, and significant lark. And if you had asked Peter at this point, he would probably have said that the mark of a true convert is joy, enthusiasm, and optimism. He would tell you that life is full of miracles for true believers, that earthly success is God's will and pattern for the faithful, and that everything will work out fine if you just trust Jesus and truly believe.

And Peter would not be kidding because that is his experience thus far – he knows because it has happened to him. What he does not know is that there is still a great deal more to come. He is in Phase One – a true convert. He has moved from fisherman to disciple. He is a different man – a new person – with a different lifestyle, a new identity, a great message, and a dynamic new purpose for his life.

Does it seem to you that we have covered the full spectrum of conversion? If so, the coming sermons are especially for you. No doubt some of the initial enthusiasm and joy of this first conversion stayed with Peter for the rest of his life. And yet his story has barely begun! The Lord is not nearly finished with Peter, and a very great deal is going to depend upon him. May I suggest quietly and simply and in a friendly way ... that at this point, Peter is a rank neophyte. He is beautifully sincere and unmistakably dedicated, and without this first conversion, none of the rest of his story could have been

possible. But Peter is still a baby in the Kingdom. His understanding is shallow and his expectations are mostly earthbound, and almost entirely wrong. Despite his willing acceptance of his task as a follower of Christ, he is still completely oblivious to the real role he will be asked to play. It will be far larger and harder and more important than anything Peter has even begun to imagine.

To be sure, Jesus is very pleased with Peter, and He is content to work with him, teach him, love him, nurture him, and be patient with him while he is growing up. But today we see Peter in Phase One – the first conversion – FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE.

May I suggest quietly and simply and in a friendly way ... that we cannot be content to let our own stories stop at Phase One.

Luke 18:28-30
Luke 22:24-33
Matthew 16:13-20

IN PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

Last Sunday we talked about Peter's first conversion, Phase One of the Christian pilgrimage. Peter may not be an exact model or illustration of this phase for everybody, but his pattern is classic, and close enough to be more than instructive for most of us.

Phase Two is not really a second conversion – that comes next Sunday. But there is a definite second phase that follows the first conversion in most of the stories of the saints. We called the first phase FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. We might call the second phase FROM DISCIPLE TO CHIEF APOSTLE. To be sure, the way our world thinks and measures, we cannot all become the chief apostle. It is nevertheless true that we move from the great initial enthusiasm of first conversion into a time of hard work, responsibility, and serious effort to be useful and effective for our Lord. The second phase is not a change of direction, but a development of the direction chosen.

Peter worked hard and advanced in the calling which he had heard and answered. He moved into a position of leadership and responsibility. The weight of it all became heavier, and his conviction and confidence and effectiveness grew steadily. This period goes from early in Jesus' ministry until just shortly before the crucifixion. Peter became First Vice President of the New Kingdom Movement. His prestige increased beyond anything he had known in his old fisherman's life. The crowds, the excitement, the popularity of Jesus' ministry was making Peter famous too. The burden and pressure were increasing to match, as it always does. We imagine, or at least I do, that Peter was essentially an optimistic, happy-go-lucky, freewheeling sort of person. In Phase Two, we sense the increasing weight that goes with Peter's new role. He starts *trying too hard*; he starts *needing to be right*; he shows more and more *defensiveness* toward that which threatens or disagrees with Jesus or what Jesus is trying to do. None of us have ever had such problems, of course, but putting humans into any position of responsibility or caring raises instant tension: can we live up to it, show ourselves worthy, maintain the level of performance implied and expected?

Peter identifies himself with Jesus and what Jesus is doing. It has become his whole existence and identity. He is it, and it is him. The success of the Movement around Jesus has become Peter's whole life. We can feel him becoming more and more "driven" to make it come out the way he wants it to. Peter's decision to follow and his reason for being – his life and soul and worth and value – are all locked up in the outcome and eventual success of Jesus' earthly ministry. This is not true, as you know, for Jesus Himself. But it is the epitome and essence of Phase Two.

It is probably not necessary to convince you of what you already know, but since I am making such a strong point of it, perhaps I should first demonstrate that this is true of Peter's story.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, Peter is the outstanding member of the twelve. Among the twelve, Peter is always named first. (Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13) He is first to be called to follow Jesus, and first to be named in the list of the twelve. To think of the apostles is to think first of Peter. If I had asked any of you to name the twelve apostles as you entered the sanctuary this morning, you would all have named Peter first, and most of you would not even remember the names of half of the others.

Peter takes the initiative, whether foolhardy or commendable. In most of the conversations between Jesus and His disciples, Peter is the one who speaks for the others. We keep coming across phrases like, "*Simon and those who were with him*" and "*Peter and those who were with him.*" (Mark 1:36; Luke 8:45; Luke 9:32) When an inner circle of the twelve is mentioned, Peter is always included and always named first. As in: The miraculous catch of fish; the raising of Jairus' daughter; the transfiguration; the scenario in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is Peter and John who are sent to prepare the Passover meal for what we call Maundy Thursday.

Peter is the one appointed to rally the disciples after Jesus' arrest. (Luke 22:31-32) According to Luke (and Paul), Jesus appeared first to Peter after the resurrection. (Luke 24:34; I Corinthians 15:5) Peter is the one charged with ministering to all the followers after the resurrection: "*Feed my sheep.*" (John 21:15-19)

Peter is the first one to recognize and declare Jesus' true identity. We shall return to that scene in a minute. Peter is the rock

upon which Christ will build His church. It is twice recorded that Jesus Himself stopped attempts on the part of James and John to take over Peter's place as chief apostle. (Mark 10:35-37; Matthew 20:20-21)

It seems quite clear, then, that Peter ranked first among the disciples of Jesus. Jesus knew it. Peter knew it. The disciples knew it. The early church knew it. You knew it. And now I know it.

Phase Two is a lot of hard work. Sometimes we forget that the Gospels only recount a few of the most memorable moments of Jesus' ministry. What do you think Peter is doing for most of those three years? "From now on, you will be catching people," Jesus had told him. The crowds keep getting bigger, the opposition keeps mounting, and you know Peter is right in the middle of it. He is chief apostle because he does not back away from it. And maybe we don't know all the details, but we know enough about life to have some understanding of how it must have been. People who could not reach or persuade Jesus would try to get to Peter. And you go to bed every night thinking of all the things you did not get done, how you might have responded to this or that situation, or what you might have said differently to this or that person. And why did your temper flare again, when you promised yourself to keep it calm? And when Jesus looked at you that time in the middle of the mayhem – was that dismay or disapproval, or was He maybe just saying, "How are you doing with all this?" Oh well, tomorrow is another day ... and here it comes now.

Like any genuine convert, Peter has a great desire to prove his worth to Jesus, to make Jesus glad that He has called Peter. After the first initial enthusiasm, Peter wants very much to succeed. Do not judge it as good or bad, it is just Phase Two. It does some good, it does some harm – it seems to be a phase we all have to pass through.

Perhaps we can best highlight the glory and pathos of Phase Two by going to Peter's finest hour within this phase. It is the highest moment of the lowest level of the Christian pilgrimage. It is Peter's confession of faith: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

They are on holiday, in Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Herman, way north of Herod's territory and their own area of ministry. Jesus has asked a crucial question. Peter, as usual, is the

only one with courage enough to dare an answer. We expect every novice Christian today to know the answer by heart. But the first time around was a different story. Jesus had never put it into words Himself. He usually referred to Himself as “Son of Man” – enigmatic on purpose. It was not Jesus’ way to push His identity onto others. He went about His business, and waited for people to discern the truth and come to their own conclusions. But now ... on retreat ... in a quiet, unhurried moment as they talk together, Jesus asks His closest friends: How are you doing with all this? Is any of it registering? Are you okay with it? Who am I?

The answer on Peter’s inside goes against everything he has been taught on the outside. It goes against everything he had grown up believing. *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.... You shall make no image of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth beneath,”* for I am holy – different from anything you can know or imagine. In reverence, no good Jew would even speak the holy name – though in truth it was not a name, but only a hint toward identity that God had given to Moses. But who then *is* this, who floods the nets with fish, and calms storms, and heals children, and reaches into your mind and fills your heart with hope and purpose like you never imagined possible before?

Peter must kick over his entire heritage to make the reply that wells up from within. It is shocking. It is blasphemy, and he could get killed for it. Eventually, he *will* get killed for it. If he is wrong, Jesus Himself will be aghast, and scandalized. Even brash, headstrong Peter must have swallowed hard before he could utter this thing that had never before been said on the face of the earth.

Better if we do not say it too lightly today either. Better if we say it with our hearts in our throats, and our temples pounding, like Peter had to. Only, the problem is, Peter *does* know who Jesus is! Oh, the exact wording is not the issue. But Peter has bet his life on Jesus – bet it on Jesus even more than he consciously knows. And there is more to life than Peter knows, and that is bet on Jesus too. Nevertheless, Peter has bet his life on Jesus and he is glad he has done it, and so he is willing to say so: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

Jesus is delighted. Peter has moved from disciple to apostle – from learner to message-bearer. Peter knows, and he will bear

witness to what he knows. “*On this rock I will build my church.*” Jesus is delighted. It is exceedingly important to notice that Jesus is not outraged.

In our time, as in every time, there is much offense in Peter’s statement. We are told, on the one hand, that we should not voice such things because it sounds so exclusive and superior to the sincere beliefs of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Buddhists, and so forth. On the other hand, if the apostles had never learned to claim their faith, we would never have heard of Jesus. On yet another hand, Jesus Himself instructs His disciples in this very same passage not to tell anyone else His true identity. That might give us at least some concern to be discerning about to whom, when, and in what circumstances we give voice to our faith. On still another hand, we are part of a tradition that for two thousand years now would rather *die* than deny or keep quiet about Jesus.

Before we can finish contemplating it, a strange thing happens. In the very wake of the great confession, almost before the sounds of the words die out, a great rift is revealed between what Peter wants and what Jesus wants. It will plague them both mightily until Phase Two comes to an end. I suppose it’s nobody’s fault, really. Jesus sees what He sees – and He sees much too deeply and much too far into the future for Peter to follow Him easily. Jesus cannot be expected to betray His vision and purpose. Peter cannot be expected to comprehend it, except on its most superficial levels. But as a result of the confession itself, and the fact that the rest of the twelve share Peter’s conviction once it has been voiced, Jesus is eager to move to a deeper level of understanding with His closest friends. It seems like this ought to be possible now that they are clear about His identity. I read it straight from the record: “*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [They did not hear it all, did they?] And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’*” (Matthew 16:21-22)

I do not want to sidetrack you, but it never ceases to amaze and dismay us that only a few minutes after Peter has declared Jesus to be the High Prince of the Entire Universe ... he also decides that he, Peter, is able and worthy to teach and instruct this same Jesus. How

that makes me shudder within. But that is the epitome of Phase Two at its worst: telling Jesus what to do, and how to do it; trying to take over, to stay in control; wanting to run things our own way. Oh yes, there is something terribly familiar about Peter.

And what is revealed is that Peter's confession of faith – no matter how appropriate, no matter how high it sounds – Peter's confession is only as big as his Phase Two perspective. When Peter says "You are the Christ," what he means is: "You are the Christ according to my definition of what that means." He means: "You are the Christ who will lead us into prosperity, fame, and success." At this point, Peter cannot fathom any other concept of the role and function of the Messiah. Jesus' strange remarks threaten all of Peter's assumptions about his own future and the meaning of his faith. Jesus is trying to serve God alone, and Peter is trying to ride Jesus' coattails into security, success, and victory in this world and in this life. In a nutshell, that is Phase Two Christianity.

Does that make your hair stand on end just a little bit? It does mine. Peter knows the right answers. But he does not know the meaning or significance of his right answers. He is not kidding about giving his loyalty or his life in the hard days ahead. He knows that the Kingdom is coming, and that, in the process of coming, there will be quite a battle. He has even felt it gathering all around him for months now. He has no intention of shirking his responsibilities. He is not even discounting the possibility that he himself may be a casualty in the coming conflict. Things happen. Peter knows that. But for Messiah Himself to be killed – unthinkable ... preposterous! On top of that, there is Peter's own personal love and affection for Jesus. "Somebody is going to try to kill you? Not on my watch, Lord – not while I'm around."

But there is a dimension to Jesus – and to the Kingdom, and to the battle – that Peter in no way comprehends. Not yet. It is no wonder! The Kingdom is not of this world, and neither is Jesus, and neither is the battle. Strangest of all, neither is Peter. And neither are you.

So Peter has come a long way. His life is devoted and committed. He knows the right answers. Only, he means them in the context of this world only, and therefore the answers – for all their enthusiasm and faith and loyalty – are entirely inadequate. Jesus

puts it a bit stronger: “*Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.*”

That must have cut Peter to the quick. It sure does when He says it to me! Peter felt the pain of the rebuke, but could not fathom its depth or understand where it was coming from. It stared at him from out on the edge of his consciousness like some dark burden of unknown weight and magnitude. It belonged to him, but he did not know how to lift it yet. He would not know what it was about until the day of the rooster. And so this terrible remark was not the end of Phase Two, but it was the beginning of the end of Phase Two.

What about our similarity to Peter? We do not always make first-chair, like Peter did, but we try to be effective. The most conscientious efforts for earthly success come after, and out of, the first conversion. It really is not selfishness alone that makes us want to succeed. We want to succeed for the Lord. We want to do our part. We want the Lord to be proud of us, and we want Him to know how much we love Him and want to serve Him. What else can we do but try to succeed at something that seems worthwhile? And usually we do find a measure of success in one place or another, in one way or another. Maybe not enough, but enough to comfort ourselves that our faith is sincere. What then?

Well, look at the pattern: Conversion ... change ... growth ... moving up ... responsibilities and leadership. What comes next? Crisis!

At first we don't believe the crisis is directly ours. It was a mistake, or it was somebody else's fault, or we just happened to be there. But the crisis is about the company or the church or the organization or the family or whatever it is we are trying to succeed with. So we think it is merely a time to give our all, to go for broke, to save the situation. (We will fight in the valleys, we will fight in the hills; we will never shirk our duty; we will never give in.) And mostly we think the situation will be saved, with God's help. It will turn out okay and we will be sitting pretty again – vindicated, secure, honored, maybe even loved. That was how it looked to Peter, until Phase Two was shattered, and he found himself in Phase Three. Phase Two is always *shattered*. It never ends in any other way.

Last week we left Peter as a happy new convert, filled with an initial enthusiasm – optimistic, success-oriented, still completely immersed in the things of this world. For the most part, that has not changed in Phase Two. Only, Peter knows a lot more. He has experience and know-how, a lot more knowledge, a clearer awareness of who Jesus really is. And he is a lot more effective and a lot more important to Jesus' ministry by now. We must not minimize that, or think that Jesus is ungrateful for it. Peter has become first among the twelve apostles, and his big concern is for the success of Jesus' New Movement.

But there is one more thing now. Peter has that terrible phrase gnawing at his insides: "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. You are not on the side of God, but of men.*" That is a very hard thing indeed, to say to the chief apostle.

Do you ever wonder about "the hindrance to Jesus" of Phase Two Christianity in our own day? It is enough to make one weep. It made Peter weep, when he finally understood. He wept until his heart and his soul and his will were broken.

Please do not get the impression that I am looking down on Peter, or thinking he was slow-witted or anything of the sort. If Peter had not tried like he did, he never could have become the right arm and the rock that Jesus needed. Phase Two is an essential part of the Pilgrim's Way, and there does not seem to be any way for any of us to skip it or duck it. Peter was doing everything humanly possible. We can surely admire and respect him for that. Only, Peter got himself mixed up with a Savior who plays for keeps, in a world that really needs saving. When that happens, everything humanly possible ... is not nearly enough.

PRAYER

O God, we do not want to chase the wind, or to be empty, or to be unprofitable children under the sun. We do not want to spend our lives in aimless wandering after values that do not matter, building castles that have no meaning in the tides of time.

Yet our sense of the eternal is very hazy, and we do not always notice very much of it around us. Those things we do not will or want, that is where we find ourselves – spending our lives on the nonsense things of space and time.

How mysterious You are, O God – holding the mystery of eternal purpose; having the mystery of power uncorrupted; being the mystery of love beyond need; shaping the mystery of truth that never leads astray; creating the mystery of beauty that throbs and changes, but never fades.

O God, if we cannot find or become or contribute to that which truly IS – grant at least that we may recognize it, and learn to worship YOU. In our Lord's name, we pray. Amen.

Luke 22:54-62
John 21:2-18

THE BREAK POINT

What is wrong with a woman making love with a man to whom she is not married? What is wrong with a man making love to a woman if they are not married? What is wrong with giving money to a person who has decided to survive by living off of other people's charity? What is wrong with telling lies if it gets you what you want, or keeps you from having unpleasantness with somebody? What is wrong with killing somebody who annoys you? Most of all, what do these things all have in common? If you have never been to Phase Three Christianity, punishment is the only reason to avoid such behavior. Most of the world has not been to Phase Three Christianity, so it goes on doing some or all of these and many other matching things, generation after weary generation. It does not work. It does not come out the way they think. But many never learn because it is not a matter of rules, primarily – it is a matter of values. It is a matter of knowing a different dimension and seeing life from a different dimension.

I will tell you the answer, but if you have not moved into Phase Three Christianity, it will make no sense to you and you will not be able to remember it. Even those of us who have been into Phase Three are known to occasionally forget, at moments – to descend to former levels – until, with a shock of dismay, we reawaken. What all of the above behaviors hold in common is this: They do not see people as valuable, as eternal souls, as precious children of God. That is the anatomy of all self-centered actions. They do not see life as something holy which we share and participate in as God's children – and in God's presence. Life is only about me, what I want, what I desire. Even if I like you, it is about me and what I like (at the moment). It is not about you. More importantly, it is not about God.

You remember Jesus' famous statement to Jimmy Carter? *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* (Matthew 5:27-28) To look with lust means you see only your own desire and not the other person's value or purpose or true identity. By the way, no rule or punishment will ever stand for very long against lust. Lust is one of

THE BREAK POINT

the Seven Deadly Sins, and none of the seven are easy to deal with. Only LOVE is strong enough to withstand and overcome lust.

These are just words – strange and meaningless words – until we enter Phase Three. And none of this is the central focus of Phase Three. Such perspectives are merely side effects.

How did Peter get into Phase Three? The same way anybody does: it is THE BREAK POINT – the breaking of the heart, the will, the soul.

A young boy was studying for his bar mitzvah. The text that day was Deuteronomy 6. The young lad asked, “Rabbi, why does it say we should keep all these words and statutes ‘on’ our hearts? Why are we not instructed to keep them ‘in’ our hearts?” The rabbi smiled with appreciation, and replied, “It is not in our power to put God’s words and will within our hearts. We put them *on* our hearts, so that when the heart breaks, God’s Word will drop in.”

This is the story of when Peter’s heart broke and The Word dropped in. Peter’s Second Conversion – Phase Three. It has gone FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE – FROM DISCIPLE TO APOSTLE – FROM APOSTLE TO SHEPHERD OF SOULS. Note that we do not lose what we gained from earlier phases. Peter never ceases to be *disciple* – learner and follower. Jesus is his Teacher, his Master. Peter never stops being *apostle* – Message-bearer and spokesman. Jesus is his Lord. But at the Break Point, Master and Lord are not enough. Jesus is Savior, or you do not make it.

The Second Conversion changes Peter even more than the first one. The content and meaning of Jesus’ mission move beyond the appeal of an earthly kingdom ... to the grace and forgiveness of God, and to awareness of a Kingdom beyond this world. Peter’s pride is shattered. Not nicked – shattered. His dreams and ambitions are scrapped, to return later on levels most earthlings either do not see or would not want. As he enters Phase Three, instead of an overt joy and delighted enthusiasm, Peter is on the brink of despair and near suicide. The joy that finally comes is out of range to Phase One and Phase Two perceptions, and so deep that no earthly sorrow can destroy it. In all ways, the Second Conversion is devastation and awakening ... dying and resurrection ... being born anew ... transformation. It is Moses so long on the mountain that they think

he has perished. It is Elijah asking permission to die in the desert cave on Mount Sinai. It is Paul blinded on the road to Damascus. It is Peter in a night so bitter that if he emerges at all, it will no longer be as a child of this earth. He will never again be mere headhunter – interested in the statistics, how many came to the meeting, how many joined the Movement. He will truly care about people and their inner spiritual journey. He will be a nurturer, a spiritual mentor, an under-shepherd of the Great Shepherd. Words are slow and poor. Let us come back to it in context.

Follow it with me as Peter comes to “point zero,” and the end of his own strength. It begins with the incident we spoke of last week. Jesus says to him, *“Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”* Peter had thought himself to be Jesus’ right arm and strongest supporter. Now Jesus, with some fierceness, declares that he is still the enemy. And it happens right while Peter is trying his hardest, and even declaring Jesus’ true identity.

In the outer story, the resistance to Jesus has been increasing. Threats and opposition have risen to serious proportions. Many former supporters have become so alarmed or frightened that, as Scripture says, they no longer “go about with him.” Peter just gets more loyal, and more determined. He assumes that Jesus trusts him totally. If Jesus can trust anybody, He can trust Peter. And that, of course, is precisely true – at this point, Jesus is unable to count on anybody.

Then, at the Last Supper, Jesus states outright that He expects Peter to deny Him. The second blow! First he is called “Satan.” Now he is accused of desertion. What has Peter done or failed to do to provoke such hurtful statements from Jesus? Lots of us would have packed it up right there. “We don’t need this,” we would have said. “After all our hard work and sincere efforts and personal friendship? The hell with you!” We hear it all the time. “I didn’t get my toy train ... my mommy died ... I lost my job ... my friend got cancer ... your church hurt my feelings – the hell with you.”

Peter is not easily dissuaded. He protests Jesus’ judgments emphatically. He swears they are not true. He will gladly lay down his life for Jesus.

Then Jesus is arrested. Will you please notice that Peter had not been kidding? If you jump to shallow conclusions about the level of Peter's denial, you will never understand his story. Peter *is* ready to fight and die, just like he promised. Peter grabs his sword and wades into the temple police despite the impossible odds. (John 18:10) There is no trace of cowardice; it is Jesus' rebuke that stops him. (Matthew 26:52-53) Then Jesus says to him, "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*" One legion of angels could have taken on the entire Roman Empire, no problem. Jesus just means that if He had wanted to play it this way, the entire host of Heaven was at His disposal. The great rift between Jesus and Peter is front and center once again: you cannot serve or defend God's Kingdom with this kind of earthly method. For the third time, Peter is rebuked. Even the wound he has inflicted is healed. (That is probably the only thing that saves Peter's life right then.) At this point, all the disciples flee, and Jesus is carried away by the temple police.

Peter's bubble has burst. Jesus is a prisoner, and no heavenly powers have intervened. This is NOT the script for any Messiah that Peter has ever heard about. So what is Peter *supposed* to do??? Everything he has tried, every way he has turned, it has always been wrong. Have you ever felt that way? Jesus is gone, and Peter himself has run away. But what is he *supposed* to do?! Jesus is on some entirely different wavelength, and nothing Peter can do or say or think of will allow him to be faithful or helpful. Peter has hit the end of his tether, and it is not long enough. His human strength and wisdom cannot follow Jesus any further – not into this crucible. Peter cannot take another step in the power of flesh and blood alone. To get beyond this "wall," he must die and be born anew. Transcend. Lay it down, and turn it over to God – all of it. Then wait some more, until God shows him how to pick it up again in an entirely different WAY.

Peter is not there yet, but he is close. He cannot leave it alone. He slinks back to what is happening – to where they are interrogating Jesus. Only now he *is* confused – and frightened – and all the weakness we all hate has descended upon him. He is not ready for the questions, and the denials pour out, and the rooster crows ... and Jesus looks up at him. Peter goes into the deep six and runs into

the night – blinded by his tears, deafened by the sound of a heart that is breaking. Remember, Peter’s whole life was wrapped up in Jesus and His Movement. He had given the full capacity of his loyalty and love to Jesus.

It is unbearable. Peter cannot hold it together any longer. He has not been faithful, and he no longer even knows what it means to be faithful. With little choice, at this point, Peter lays it down – his life, his pride, his willfulness, his human aspirations. It all disappears into the night ... chasing the cry of a rooster. (Bitter was the night ...) You never want your children, your loved ones, to have to go through such a time – such a dark night of the soul – do you? Isn’t there some other way into the Kingdom? Some easier, softer way?

It is the Break Point. Peter is undone! All that matters most to him, he has forsaken. Unfortunately for Jesus, Peter will not process all of this and rally fast enough to gather all the followers and appear before Pilate at Jesus’ trial. We never seem to get there in time, do we? To be with Him ... to really follow His lead ... to do it His way. “Hey Pilate, no insurrection – it’s your call. But we’re with HIM. Kill Him, kill us. He is the only hope – yours, ours, anybody’s.”

In many ways, Peter will die with Jesus far more than if the soldiers had killed him. He will die in such a way that the fear of death will never again control him. Therefore, the fear of life – success, fame, riches, honor – will no longer control him either. Very shortly, Peter’s life will bear this out.

We must move now – through how many days or weeks we cannot tell for sure – to the other end of Peter’s Second Conversion. There is always a second part to the Second Conversion. We would not last long in part one, if that were all there was to it.

We go to THE LAST BREAKFAST, where Jesus helps Peter pick it up again, on the other side. For some reason unfathomable to me, the general population and even many Christians are not as familiar with the Last Breakfast as they are with other parts of the story. Let us review it quickly.

Peter no longer thinks of himself as chief apostle. He thinks of himself as utter failure. The Break Point does not leave anybody

feeling good about themselves. Yet Peter has been a witness to the Resurrection. How glad that must make him! Jesus is alive, and the Kingdom will move forward, and the power of God has come through at last! But like some of you, Peter is delighted about the Resurrection without feeling himself to be any part of it. Hooray for Jesus – but Peter has failed Jesus. He is no longer worthy to participate in the Movement. It has passed him by and he has missed his chance. At least that is the way he sees it. Gone are all his noble aspirations. He no longer seeks fame or success. The earthly kind no longer matter, and the New Kingdom coming is not for deserters. He has failed. He sees himself as unworthy, useless, and unwanted. He is right about the first two. But the third one is not his call to make. One last time, he has misjudged Jesus, and misunderstood God. He *is* wanted! The whole thing has been about the grace and love of God. He is about to find out about that. And you cannot find out about that until Phase Three. Before Phase Three, they are only pretty words, and even if we say them, they do not register.

Anyway, Peter is finished, washed out, through. He heads back to his former life. He is not going on vacation or indulging in sport – fishing is his trade, his old life. He does not know what else to do. So he goes back to fishing, back up in Galilee.

Then it happens again, just like before. Only, it couldn't be – not after all that has happened. But the nets are bursting again and there are fish everywhere. As the shock goes through him, Peter knows it can only be Jesus, there on the shore. Peter is so consternated with guilt and joy and surprise and eagerness – all at the same time – that he doesn't know what to do. It is really quite humorous. Peter is stripped for work, and he suddenly realizes that he is not supposed to be here, working. These were not his instructions. Quickly he puts on his clothes, like, “Oh, I'm not *really* working.” Then he realizes he cannot fool Jesus. Oh well ... So he jumps overboard. Not to walk on water this time – this time the boat is too slow and he cannot wait to greet Jesus.

Once on shore, everybody is shy and sheepish – you know how it is when there is a lot of unfinished agenda in the air. Jesus suggests some fish for breakfast. You can tell how much tension there is by the way Peter calmly dashes to the boat and hauls the whole net ashore – all 153 fish. Jesus wasn't quite *that* hungry.

A little later, after breakfast, when things have quieted down, Jesus deals with Peter's soul-sickness. Three times he had denied. Now, three times he must reaffirm. How characteristic of Jesus – simple, direct, profound. “Do you love me?” Each affirmation erases the guilt and shame, and replaces the negation and betrayal with affirmation and reinstatement.

Unmistakably, Peter is “back in.” The content of The Word is grace and mercy and love. The unwanted, unworthy, useless servant is wanted and worthy and useful again. The proof is that the commission is reissued. But there is a difference: It is much deeper now – and so is Peter. Before, it was an invitation. Now it is a command. Do not be offended by that word. Jesus is resurrected now. He has conquered sin and death. He cannot pretend to be a simple rabbi anymore. It is a COMMAND: “*Feed my sheep ... tend my sheep ... feed my lambs.*” The image of netting, hooking, or catching people like fish is no longer adequate. Has the church missed this turn, somewhere down the backroad?

Without pride or perfectionism, Peter is about to begin a new ministry in response to a second calling and a second conversion. It is no longer for his own glory or success. It is for Christ and the New Kingdom. Win, lose, or draw is no longer of much importance to Peter. Only one thing matters now: God's will, made known in Jesus Christ.

Peter still has much to learn, as we will see. But he has died to this world, and he belongs to Jesus Christ. He is now an authentic servant/apostle, shepherd-class. Try “Mentor,” if you do not like sheep or shepherds. Peter will go when the Lord says “Go.” He will stay when the Lord says “Stay.” He will endure if the Lord says “Endure.” He will not try to make any more grandstand plays. He will not seek success, or fear defeat. He will not seek defeat, or fear success. Those are irrelevant categories to Phase Three. His life no longer depends upon anything in or of this world. It is “*hid with Christ in God.*” (Colossians 3:3)

Peter may still goof up. But he will not again deny his Lord. He may misunderstand or mistake the Spirit's instructions from time to time – for a while. But he will not again betray his Lord. The world no longer holds anything Peter wants badly enough to make him do that again. And the world is about to have all the same problems with

Peter that it formerly had with the man called Jesus, who has become Peter's Lord and Savior. As you might suspect, that is Phase Four.

PRAYER

With laughter and tears, sweat and blood, patience and determination – You have loved us, and put up with us, and carried us to this present day, O God. We have followed and rebelled; we have believed and doubted; we have seen signs and great wonders; we have felt and known Your truth even though, for us, it is always partly garbled. So we have hated and blamed You, and praised and loved You. And probably it will go on this way for as long as we live in this broken realm. But let us find Your Ways and Paths more than any other, we pray – for apart from You, life is as nothing. And thanks be to You, in Christ Jesus our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

WEAKNESS & POWER

There is a dimension to Phase Four that I will only mention in passing. Peter's spiritual power keeps increasing. He heals, he teaches, and he preaches with greater and greater impact. His influence becomes enormous. No follower of Jesus has greater stature in the first century of the Christian era than the Apostle Peter. At the same time, Peter is weak and vulnerable in the political and material world of his time. Often arrested, imprisoned, whipped, ordered to keep silent – Peter has no stature at all in the outer, physical realms. He is a strange contradiction – a study of weakness and power. I am not wise enough yet to do a really good sermon on the subject. But I will hand you the hint: Phase Four, I believe, is always some kind of contradiction between weakness and power. It is why the Christian Life is never comfortable to us here. Only, you can never tell how the weakness and power will manifest, or in what proportion, or in which areas of life. But enough. Back to Peter.

We cannot tell Peter's story unless we see that there was much going on which was a lot bigger than Peter. Pray that this be true of your story – and our story – as well. In any case, I have been told from time to time that the Book of Acts is rather boring in comparison to the Gospels. An amazing comment. The dynamism of the early church literally exploded onto the world scene after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is surely one of the most compelling and astounding occurrences in all the annals of humankind. Can you imagine some human group of entrepreneurs designing and choreographing a movement that would start with a handful of Jewish peasants and end up converting the Roman Empire in under three hundred years? And this was not just a minor adjustment of Roman views and values. It went from Polytheism to Monotheism – a vast switch in moral and ethical norms; a growing realization that all humans are valuable, not just a few elite rulers. Jesus' parables of the yeast and the mustard seed were true. What He started swept through the known world like a gigantic tidal wave.

Peter was a highly visible influence in this new movement. Yet nobody in Peter's time realized just how dynamic and far-reaching it would turn out to be. Or rather, they expected the action to come from God, and that he would close down the world as we knew it –

and they thought humans would have nothing to say about it. They did not yet realize that the action would come from the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that it would spread through the world as we knew it – transforming all those willing to be touched by it, and allowing everyone else to go on in whatever manner they chose. It is the great difference between the Messiah we got and the Messiah we expected: that Jesus insists on working with us – on inviting us to be full participants in the drama – no matter how long it takes. Those still waiting for a Second Coming – a time when God will do it all for us and despite us (or to spite us) – have not figured out yet what Jesus is really like, or what He is about.

So here is Peter, having come through Phase Three – the Second Conversion, the Break Point. He has awakened to the grace and love of Jesus in dimensions beyond anything he had imagined during Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter is reinstated as apostle and friend – by Jesus – *after* the crucifixion and resurrection. Clearly, Jesus is the High Prince of Heaven. Never mind, for the moment, what *you* think or believe – this is what Peter knows, and it is all quite a lot for Peter to assimilate. I mean, it's one thing to pal around with a guy you think the world of, and even realize is a gifted Messenger of God with amazing powers and purpose. It “ups the ante” a long way when this guy comes waltzing back after being crucified – and still acts as personal and caring toward you as He did before! What do you say? What can you think? How do you wrap your mind and your life around such a thing?! The point is that Jesus will go on using Peter in dramatic and powerful ways, but Peter is not the initiator of any of it. Peter is not in charge of any of it. Peter is just trying – desperately sometimes – to respond and stay faithful to what Jesus, and the Holy Spirit of Jesus, keeps initiating.

So Peter is not the only actor in this drama, not by a long shot. The movement cannot explode into the world unless Jesus can break His followers loose from a lot of old assumptions and expectations – from a lot of old ways of thinking and believing. That is what the Book of Acts starts talking about right from the beginning. The disciples are confused, disorganized, and enthralled that Jesus has appeared to them, but nobody has the faintest notion what to do next. So, typically, they elect officers. Then they find a replacement for Judas – picking a man we never heard of before, and will never

hear of again. Nothing. Nothing is happening. No human can make it happen. Then vroom! Pentecost. The Spirit strikes.

Today we like to get sidetracked into the details of the Pentecost story. Are people speaking in tongues of ecstasy, or are they understanding the message in their native language? Are they drunk? Who is speaking? What is really happening? But let us not miss the real point! *“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.”* (Acts 2:9) They are ALL hearing the message. And as the names of all the nations roundabout are tolled off, the hair on the back of your neck starts to stand up straight and salute.

What had the Chosen People been chosen for? *“Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ‘I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; **I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations**, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.”* (Isaiah 42:5-9)

*“And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – God says: ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; **I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.**’”* (Isaiah 49:5-6)

Jesus is more Jewish than Judaism. All the early followers see Him not as a break from Judaism, but as the fulfillment of Judaism. Judaism had gotten sidetracked – bogged down in its own personal problems, which were considerable. Sound familiar? We understand that one. But now, what greater proof of Messiahship than the realization that God’s purpose is back on track? *“Parthians, Medes,*

*Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome.... **I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.***” It is starting to happen, right before their eyes.

Only, it is not just about territory. God’s grace is often limited by nationalism, to be sure, but it is also frequently limited by type and kind. We are the good guys, and you are not included unless you become like us. Philip the deacon is directed by the Spirit (Acts 8:26) to go walking on the road from Jerusalem toward Gaza. On that road, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, the Queen’s steward and treasurer. He is returning to Ethiopia from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As Philip comes up to the carriage, he hears the man reading from the Book of Isaiah: *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb that is dumb before the shearer, he does not open his mouth. He has been humiliated and has no redress. Who will be able to speak of his posterity? For he is cut off from the world of the living.”* (Isaiah 53:7-8)

If you concentrate really hard for a while, you can probably figure out why these words would be especially poignant for a eunuch. So Philip and the Ethiopian have a heart-to-heart conversation. The man is enthralled by Philip’s account of Jesus and the Gospel Message, and at the end of the conversation he asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” So Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in some nearby water. But this is scandalous! Why do you think this story is in here? When the Ethiopian asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” – what he fully expects is to hear Philip say, “Gosh, I’m really sorry, but you know very well that Torah forbids us to allow eunuchs into our membership.” (*“He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.”* (Deuteronomy 23:1))

Yet Philip baptizes him without a qualm. Scandalous! The Ethiopian is a foreigner, he is doubtless black, he is definitely eunuch, and he is IN – all the way in one play. Hey wait a minute! Who is changing all the rules?! It is rocking the world – especially the world of Judaism. The New Testament takes a dramatic stance about God’s grace and acceptance made known in Jesus Christ. It will end up driving a wedge between Jew and Christian that will create two

world religions where there should have been only one. Some of you are possibly realizing that we have enormous controversy in our own time, with people quoting Old Testament texts to prove that certain types of people are not welcome in the church or cannot have full membership rights within the church – almost as if they have never heard of the Book of Acts. It is a huge and terrible problem. How do you let people into your faith family if you think it will dilute or destroy everything you believe in and care about? On the other hand, if what you believe includes the notion that God loves *all* of his children – and that your very purpose is to be a light to the nations which draws all people to God – then what?

Well, Peter is Apostle at the very beginning of this explosion and controversy. He does not design it or ask for it, but he is quickly caught up in it. I could not figure out how to go on with his story without reminding you of this context. The hottest battles of the New Testament – of the early church – are not between the church and the world. They are between the church and the church. They are controversies *within* the church – as always. In this case, it is between that portion of the church which believes it must keep all of the precepts, laws, and customs of former days or it will be unfaithful and probably end up rejected by God – and that portion of the church which believes that Jesus came for everyone, and that Jesus' grace and love supercede old precepts, laws, and customs. By the way, heresies go off the deep end in both directions. But we cannot say it all. So let's get to Peter's Third Conversion – Phase Four.

Like most of us, Peter does not get past his old attitudes easily. Remember that he had long since given his life to Jesus – way back in the First Conversion. That was *not* enough – contrary to popular, simplistic views on the subject. That was not enough. Then Peter hit the end of his own tether – the end of human pride and confidence. He died with Christ and was born anew – turning will and life and plans and purposes over to his Lord. *That* was not enough either. Now he is to become a major leader and evangelist and witness in this new movement we call Christianity – only, not by his own wisdom or light alone. And that means the Holy Spirit has to break Peter out of some prejudices and narrow ways of thinking, or Peter cannot be helpful to a lot of the people that Jesus wants to reach and bring in.

Third Conversion. This is no theoretical exercise. All good theology is experiential at base. There is a Roman Centurion – a real, live person. His name is Cornelius. He lives in Caesarea – the Roman capital of Judea and Samaria – at the heart of the Roman occupation of Israel. A Centurion is a man of some wealth and prominence, and if he is converted, it will have a huge influence. We are not allowed to think in crass or pragmatic ways like this, but the Holy Spirit can. Cornelius is a devout man – a man of good deeds and of prayer. But he needs some human contact if he is to get in on the purpose and mission of Christ. So Cornelius has a vision, and, obedient to his instructions, he sends messengers to invite Peter to come talk to him about the faith. That’s the easy part. Now the Holy Spirit has to find some way to get Peter to accept the invitation. That’s the hard part. Jews can have business transactions with pagans, but they do not eat with them, socialize, or act like friends. It might be less offensive, under special circumstances, for the Jew to invite the pagan – that way at least the Jew could be host and keep a kosher table. But that is beside the point. Nobody makes a genuine convert at arm’s length, with all manner of judgment, disapproval, distaste, and disdain up-front and showing. And stuff like that is harder to hide than we like to pretend.

So Peter has a vision. I know you get it, but let’s say it straight out: The purpose of the vision is to tell Peter to stop being kosher. People are more important than dietary laws. The purpose of the vision is to tell Peter to break from some of the traditions and truths he has been taught from the time of his birth until now. The purpose of the vision is to instruct Peter to defy what he thinks of as the Law of Moses and the authority of Torah – and to go act like a friend and brother to this pagan enemy officer of his people. Conversion means “to change.” This is a mighty change! This is Peter’s Third Conversion.

Peter is greatly alarmed, of course. In passing, we get a hint of Peter’s devoutness. Never in his life has he broken the dietary laws. He is sure there is some mistake. God could not be asking him to go against God’s word and law. “Dear Deity, surely you jest! Didn’t your parents send you to Sunday School?” But the voice insists: “*It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean.*” A little mini-summation of the Gospel of grace and mercy.

This scenario is enacted three times. Peter has already had some experience with threes. It is the code, the earmark – he knows it is Jesus. So he shrugs off a lifetime of training and conviction, welcomes the messengers, and goes off with them the next morning to be the guest of Cornelius. Meanwhile, Cornelius has gathered his friends and relatives together to hear Peter. It ends, of course, with all of them believing, receiving the Holy Spirit, getting baptized. Another very early, very dramatic incidence of the Gospel breaking beyond the borders to bring in people none of the early followers would, of themselves, have thought to bring in. It is the beginning of the explosion. With a couple of hard swallows – and a temporary moment of weakness – Peter will side with that wing of Christendom which includes and accepts the Gentiles. His stance: *“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”*

So Peter was changed once again. In the hottest battle of first-century Christianity, Peter went against everything he had formerly considered sacred, and he came down on the side of those who were determined to let people like us – the pagans, the non-Jews – into the church. Peter got into enormous trouble for it, lost a lot of friends and relatives over it – and helped to change the history of the world because of it. Hope you won't let it go for nothing.

Meanwhile, be it noted: In Phase Four, Peter was still being dealt with, taught, changed, and transformed by his Lord. He was into terrain that was not about him specifically or personally. Religion is more than a private affair. Peter's efforts were for the benefit of others, and about issues he would have been happy to leave alone forever. But he was in the midst of things exceedingly important to Christ Jesus his Lord. Incidentally, he made some wonderful friends he would never have known otherwise. And those friends made other friends for Jesus that numbered first into the hundreds ... then into the thousands ... then into the millions. I think that some of you are among them.

PRAYER

It is up to You, O Christ, to bring all the words and thoughts of our minds to life or death. It is up to You to bring all the deeds of our hands to profit or loss. It is up to You to bring all the yearnings of our hearts and souls to fruition or frustration. We do not mean to shirk, or to sidestep, our part in the LIFE You have given us. We are only realizing more and more that beyond our sight and beyond our abilities, You are at work in us, and for us – and You hold wisdom and power we cannot fathom. So we are glad that there are thoughts and deeds and yearnings within us ... or there would be no way for You to work with us.

Send us each into our own Phase Four – where no matter what is happening on the outside, our minds and efforts may be focused on You and Your Kingdom. Teach us to watch and wait constantly for Your Spirit's guidance. And help us to trust You so completely that by the time death comes for us, we will have no stake left here except in those we love.

And speaking of those we love, we are grateful to be able to pray now together, as You taught us to, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*

QUO VADIS

It is my hope that you have met Peter in deeper places and know him better than you did before. Some of you, I know, have meditated on Peter's pilgrimage far beyond what I have been able to put into these sermons. You are a wonderful congregation to preach to – not because you sometimes agree with me, but because you really seem to know what a sermon is for, and then you take it from there. What a delight to find one's self among fellow pilgrims.

What I hope you will remember most from this series on Peter is that there are many levels of conversion – and that each one is followed by a period of reconstruction, a time when we must reorder our living. And each level leaves us with a clearer vision of our mission and ministry, which is not to say that it is as clear as we would like it to be. In any case, we can always be sure that another conversion is on its way. Walking with our Lord is never “all cut-and-dried.”

Many exciting things happened to Peter that we have had no time to mention. Many revelations came to him that we have not touched upon. Yet the four major phases of his Christian pilgrimage are clear enough for us to gain great insight into our own journeys. I have no new surprises today. I just want to pick up some of the loose ends, and gather together some of the threads that I myself want to remember.

I.) IT IS A WALK INTO THE UNKNOWN

If you go to Disneyland, you can pay a small sum for the privilege of a mini-adventure. That is, you can take a journey that is preplanned to be both interesting and safe. You have reasonable assurance that you will arrive again all in one piece, and that you will end up exactly where you started. Disney spends millions, and makes billions, to provide fake pilgrimages. All hunger for adventure is really hunger for pilgrimage, and deep is the hunger. The lines stay long, year after year.

But as we all know, true pilgrimages do not seem as safe to us. In the long run, they are much better planned and far safer. But humans always have more trouble with long runs than with short

runs. Why else would faith (trust) be so essential? In any case – for us, to follow Jesus is to walk into the unknown. The closest we come to a chart or map is looking at the stories of those who have gone before us, as we have tried to do with Peter.

It seems clear that through most of it, Peter did not see what God was doing with him. Sometimes he got glimmers, and sometimes he thought he understood when he really did not. He did not know where or how it would end. I doubt that Peter knew at all how much he accomplished. When he thought it was most, it was sometimes least. When he thought it was least, it was sometimes most. Do I see about 130 Simon Peters sitting here before me?

It seems important, at least to me, to remember that going with Jesus is to walk into the unknown. We can be very certain that we will not come back to where we started. We have God’s promise for a final, far-off security, but we have to trust God enough to live in the present as if that security and peace were in and all around us now, or we would not even be able to go on the pilgrimage past a step or two. Yet we hold such promises in the tenuousness of human minds and hearts. Sometimes, when I do not understand what is going on – when the road seems hard and the Kingdom looks frail and weak – it is good to *remember* that I do not understand what is going on. As with Peter, we long to know. But that is not our responsibility. Sometimes all God needs or expects from us are the devotion and the will to keep walking. In fact, it is almost always that way just before a crucifixion – just before each new conversion. Invariably, we feel most blind just before God’s light breaks forth anew. This is no theory of mine. We have endless sayings to this effect: “It is always darkest before the dawn.” “Don’t leave before the miracle happens.” And so on. Of course, there is also a blindness that is willful and rebellious. But that is a different animal. And they are not easily confused, since pride and humility do not feel the same way at all. In any case, “walking in the light of the Lord” means that *He* sees – not always that we do. All we really know for sure is that if we follow this Jesus, our lives will turn out to be very different from what they would otherwise have been like.

It is important to know and expect the Christian pilgrimage to be this way. To follow Jesus is to walk into the unknown. It is not because Peter was stupid or because we are stupid, though that is

often what we try to tell ourselves. It is because He sees so far beyond our sight. It is also because all that we have experienced and known is in a realm at least partially alienated from God. The phases of the Christian journey are essential because the journey itself means moving from conscious awareness in a physical realm to conscious awareness in the spiritual realm. That is why the pattern itself is a series of conversions – transcendent leaps – after coming to a place of bankruptcy ... to break points. Physical-realm levels of awareness keep leading us into blind alleys and dead-end streets. Conversion is when the Spirit lifts us out, and we find ourselves growing and moving on a different level. That is why I always wince when somebody suggests a reduction of the Christian Faith that makes it sound like some mild, humanistic truism. Like: “God helps those who help themselves.” (Help yourself? To what? More mashed potatoes and gravy? And what a very nasty thing to say to someone who really is in a true spiritual crisis.) If you can help yourself, you do not need God – and you certainly do not need a Savior. God helps those who cannot help themselves – at least not enough.

Jesus calls us into the many phases of the Christian pilgrimage on purpose, or at least I have come to believe that this is true. Can you ever forgive Him for that? Jesus preached and taught and called His disciples into a ministry He knew would fail (on our level – from our perspective). Telling it like it is: Jesus led Peter into a life that would be too much for Peter, and He did it on purpose. Jesus knows that every mother’s son and daughter who hears the Call of the Kingdom will commit themselves to a road that dead-ends in some bitter night of brokenness and denial. Have you heard the rooster’s cry?

If Jesus’ own road had not been the same – if He had not also gone through Gethsemane and to the crucifixion – we could never forgive Him for the pilgrimage He calls us into. There would be no way we could trust Him ever again for calling us to hope and love too high – for calling forth our idealism and every shred of spiritual hunger within us. It does not fit in this world. It will only cause us to see ourselves, and most of what is going on around us, in a light we cannot abide, cannot stand. You have heard of the Damascus Road? And Jesus does that to us on purpose.

The road does not really dead-end, of course. It leaps to a new dimension – to resurrection. After the bitter night, Peter discovered GRACE, and a whole different way to perceive and live for the Kingdom. We are not saved by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount or any of the precepts that Jesus Himself taught. We are saved by the grace and love of a Risen Christ. Only, there is no way to know or experience it except to come through the bitter night of brokenness and denial ourselves. We cannot do this for each other, and we cannot do it by merely reading about it or thinking about it. Isn't *that* a fine kettle of fish?! (*Selah*) Jesus did not come to tell us what He came and told us. He came to *show us* and to lead us into something far deeper – something we can in no way hear or understand until we follow Him. And following Him will lead us first into dead-ends, bitter tears, and broken pride.

What Jesus shows us is far greater than what He tells us. Some people never figure this out. Lots of the teachings end with things like: “*Bring my enemies here and slaughter them in my presence.*” (Luke 19:27) But what Jesus shows us is: “*Father forgive them*” and “*This day you will be with me in paradise*” and “*Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.*” Some people never make the switch. They still think it is about sending the enemies to Hell, instead of being about getting all of us out of Hell and into Heaven.

What Jesus shows us is far greater than what He tells us. It is not that the misleading is a game or that there is some other way. It is simply inevitable, if we are to awaken at all. It can be said of the Christian Life that, in truth, “You cannot get there from here.” There is no human road that leads step-by-step to Heaven. It requires the grace and mercy of God. It requires being born anew. It requires the mysterious and almighty power of a love we cannot deserve and can neither understand nor control.

Jesus went on to death and resurrection knowing that His followers would come to Phase Two and Phase Three ... and be lost without grace. There is no hope in our good deeds – no way to live in the Kingdom by our good intentions. Only grace can bridge the gulf between our world and God. That is the pure essence of Peter's story, as it is also the truth revealed in Jesus Christ – the Gospel.

The Gospel is not a story about man's good deeds or high ideals. It is a message about God's mercy and love and power, made

known in Jesus Christ. You already know this, but it would be sad not to see that Peter's life shows and fits the same truth, clear to the hilt.

II.) A GLANCE AT PETER'S LIFE

There is a great deal of information about Peter that is not found in the New Testament. It is also impossible to sort it all out – fact from legend; legend from moralism or theological statement. Even taking this into consideration, it appears that much of what Peter had longed for early in his life came his way after he no longer cared about it. His fame and reputation grew beyond anything he had imagined in his early days. The veneration was embarrassing at times. What would Peter think of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome? Peter had to constantly remind people that Jesus was the source – even as Jesus kept reminding people that God was the source.

Through all this “success,” Peter's life was still constantly in danger. Persecution and prison dogged his steps for the rest of his life. What a sad reward for such a faithful servant. Wouldn't Peter have been better off never to have met or followed Jesus? We know what Peter would have said to that. Are we like Peter in that way also? We hope to be, more and more.

Peter became bold, adventurous – in many ways, fearless. Why does the Christian Faith today so often make people cautious, careful, afraid to take risks, and afraid to make mistakes? Is faith supposed to free us for more life because we trust in Heaven, or shut us down to boredom and tiptoeing around every challenge because we fear Hell?

Not in this church, of course, but have you not known some church members who got so focused on their own goodness, their own perfect records, and their own good example that they had no time left over to follow Jesus? Can this be the same Faith that Peter was into? Peter's bitter night did not have this effect upon him – quite the reverse. The experience of grace set him free! Instead of heading toward some frightened and cautious perfectionism, he went for broke! What is the good of knowing the love of God if it only makes us afraid of human opinions, and afraid to taste LIFE?

Peter had a lot to fear from the world but, knowing the love of God, he did not fear it anymore. Grace is like that. Its effect cuts out more and more of our desires and temptations for things that have no real value, but it also frees us to receive and enjoy true LIFE in gratitude and joy.

III.) AN ENDING

There is an earthly ending to every story. We come to Peter's now. Jesus had already hinted at it: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go."*

That summarizes the whole pilgrimage in some ways. In the beginning, Peter did his own thing. After his second conversion, Peter stretched out his hands more and more to the Lord, and the Lord girded him and sent him on the business of the Kingdom. Until, according to the records outside the New Testament, on June 29th, A.D. 64, under the Emperor Nero, Peter was crucified – head downward, at his own request. Peter did not seek equality with Jesus, as Jesus did not seek equality with God. (Philippians 2:6)

I will read the account from a manuscript called "The Acts of Peter." Some of the language is archaic, but I think you will hear past it and find it interesting in the light of our Lenten meditations. We walk in on the discovery of a plot against Peter's life while he is visiting and strengthening the Christians in Rome.

But while they made these plans Xanthippe discovered her husband's conspiracy with Agrippa and sent and told Peter, so that he might withdraw from Rome. And the rest of the brethren together with Marcellus entreated him to withdraw. But Peter said to them, "Shall we act like deserters, brethren?" But they said to him, "No, it is so that you can go on serving the Lord." So he assented to the brethren and withdrew by himself, saying, "Let none of you come with me, for it will be safer if I escape by myself in disguise." And as Peter went out of the gate he saw the Lord entering Rome; and when he saw him he said, "Quo vadis, Lord?" Which means "LORD, WHITHER GOEST THOU?"

And the Lord said to him, "I am coming to Rome to be crucified."

Peter said to him, "Lord, art thou being crucified again?" He said to him, "Yes, Peter, I am being crucified again." And Peter came to himself; and he saw the Lord ascending into Heaven. Then he returned to Rome rejoicing and giving praise to the Lord, because he said, "I am being crucified," since this was to happen to Peter.

So he returned to the brethren and told them what had been seen by him; and they were grieved at heart, and said with tears, "We entreat you, Peter, take thought for us that are young." And Peter said to them, "If it is the Lord's will, it is coming to pass even if we will not have it so. But the Lord is able to establish you in your faith, and he will lay your foundation on him and enlarge you in him, you whom he himself has planted, so that you may plant others through him. But as for me, so long as the Lord wills me to be in the flesh, I do not demur; again, if he will take me, I rejoice and am glad."

And while Peter was saying this and all the brethren were in tears, four soldiers arrested him and took him to Agrippa. And Agrippa in his distemper ordered that he be charged with irreligion and be crucified. [It is one of the ironies of history that most of the early Christian martyrs were charged with being irreligious. It was because they would not worship the Emperor.]

So the whole mass of the brethren came together, rich and poor, orphan and widows, capable and helpless, wishing to see Peter and rescue him; and the people cried out irrepressibly with a single voice, "What harm has Peter done, Agrippa? How has he injured you? Answer the Romans!" And others said, "If this man dies, we must fear that the Lord will destroy us too."

When Peter came to the place of execution he quieted the people and said, "You men, who are soldiers of Christ, men who set their hopes on Christ, remember the signs and wonders which you saw through me, remember the

compassion of God, how many healings he has performed for you. Wait for him that shall come and reward everyone according to his deeds. And now do not be angry with Agrippa; for he is the servant of his father's influence; and this is to happen in any event, because the Lord has showed me what is coming. But why do I delay and not go to the cross?"

Then when he had approached and stood by the cross he began to say, "O name of the cross, mystery that is concealed! O grace ineffable that is spoken in the name of the cross! O nature of man that cannot be parted from God! O love unspeakable and inseparable, that cannot be disclosed through unclean lips! I seize thee now, being come to the end of my release from here. I will declare thee, what thou art; I will not conceal the mystery of the cross that has long been enclosed and hidden from my soul. You who hope in Christ, for you the cross must not be this thing that is visible; for this passion, like the passion of Christ, is something other than this which is visible. And now above all, since you who can hear, can hear it from me, who am at the last closing hour of my life, give ear; withdraw your souls from every outward sense and from all that appears but is not truly real; close these eyes of yours, close your ears, withdraw from actions that are outwardly seen; and you shall know the facts about Christ and the whole secret of your salvation. Let so much be said to you who hear as though it were unspoken.

"But it is time for you, Peter, to surrender your body to those who are taking it. Take it, then, you whose duty this is. I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards – in this way and no other."

One last time, Peter reverses his former denial and desertion. But though forgiven, he has not forgotten. It seems inappropriate to him even to die in the same manner as his Lord. There is only one Savior, and Peter knows it.

Quo vadis – whither goest thou? That is the question of the faithful. Peter's logic is simple. He does not ask why or wherefore. Where the Lord goes, he will go. That is the purpose of the follower.

QUO VADIS

He does not go to be crucified in Jesus' place. He goes to be crucified *with* Him. It is the last and greatest conversion.

PRAYER

Lord, where do You go today? We who are called to be Your "body" – partly we ask, and partly we know: You go to all the crosses of the faithful, the broken, the lonely, the outcast, the disinherited. Prepare us to go with You wherever You go.

Yet, alone we cannot make it to all of Your appointments. But as Your body, together, we can accompany You to the appointed places – each of us to where You call us – to stand with those You are finding and healing and calling and sending ... and sometimes to suffer for those who do not yet know Your name – to bear witness to those You love and forgive and uphold ... until they know.

Quo vadis, Lord? This day we pray Your prayer together, but in silence, and wait upon Your answer. Amen.