

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid  
The Third Sunday of Easter | Year C | John 21:1-19  
St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Sinking Spring, PA  
May 5th 2019

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Life is full of moments that bring us back to prior memories -- there are some smells, sounds, places, and images that immediately take us back to the first time we encountered them. In an instant, our senses recall these seemingly small details and it's like we're taken to a certain place in our life, or back to the presence of a loved one from years past, or to a time when we were even just children.

This happened to me recently -- last weekend, the Diocese of Bethlehem hosted a youth retreat at Bear Creek in the Poconos. I was excited to get up there and help out because I had been to Bear Creek once as a child. I was probably eight or nine years old the last time I went there, but as soon as I made my way down the long driveway and into the main cabin, it was like I'd never left. Everything was familiar -- the roaring fire in the fireplace, the smell of leaves and the woods, the sight of the old pavilion and the bunks -- the great memories I had from childhood left a strong association with those sights and sounds and smells, and part of me felt like I was reliving those very first moments.

Now that's all well and good when the memories are pleasant. It's a different feeling entirely when it's a memory we'd rather forget. Then the sights and sounds and smells make us relive something we'd sooner not remember. In the Bible, I'm not sure anyone would know this feeling better than Peter would. It was Good Friday when Peter found himself alone, fearful for what might happen to himself given what was about to happen to Jesus, and strangely enough, he was cold. So he found a charcoal fire and began to warm himself. It was then that his infamous denials occurred. Asked three times if he knew Jesus, Peter emphatically denied that he had anything to do with him. And when the cock crowed, Peter broke down in tears for the guilt that overtook him amidst the smoke of the charcoal fire.

Fast-forward to the Gospel scene from this morning, and Peter and the boys are out fishing once more. Peter hears that the Lord is at the shore, and he's thrilled to see him again, even jumping out of the boat to swim to shore as quickly as he can. But as he approaches the shore, a familiar scent filled the air. I can't imagine how the smell of yet another charcoal fire would have made him feel, taking him immediately back to just a few days earlier, to his fear, to his shame, to his denial. The smoke of the fire might have lingered like an unwelcome guest, or maybe like the elephant in the room just waiting to be dealt with. But as he so often does, Jesus changes the whole scene. He takes Peter aside, and though he could have reprimanded Peter for his denial, he does something else. He takes this moment, this smell and image and memory of the charcoal fire, and transforms it, allowing Peter to remember a new calling from it. Instead of leaving Peter in a place of guilt or shame, Jesus gives him a task, entrusts him with his flock, and asks him once more to follow him.

We may have many moments or memories in our lives that we associate with guilt or shame, memories that come rushing back sometimes by just being in a certain place or smelling a particular perfume or even being around certain people. For Peter, the smell and sight of the charcoal would have done just that, but Jesus wasn't going to let Peter stay in a place of fear and shame, and he knew that Peter had too much good work still to do. I believe Jesus also feels the same way about each of us and another image -- that of water. For all of the people of God, water was not always a great thing. In the beginning, as God began to create the heavens and the earth, water was a sign of chaos, of disorder, of imperfection. A little later on in the story, the waters of the flood were a sign of destruction. And still later, the Israelites ran into the waters of the Red Sea with no place to turn and with Pharaoh's armies chasing after them. But in each instance, God intervened and changed our memories associated with water -- creation calms the chaos, the Ark saves humanity from the flood, and the Israelites pass through the waters safely to the other side.

The people of God could remember water the same way Peter would have remembered the charcoal fire -- as an recollection of fear, shame, and despair. But just as Jesus made the charcoal fire a new beginning for Peter, so has he made the waters of baptism a new beginning for us. We who are buried with Christ in the waters of baptism will come to know those same waters as life-giving, as the way to resurrection life in him. Even as Jesus ends his words to Peter about how he will die, his final word is still "follow me". Even we who will die in this life hear these same words, "follow me"; follow me through the smoke and uncertainty of the charcoal fire, follow me through the waters of baptism, follow me even to our last days on this earth -- because even in death we will know Jesus' way as the way of life.

It wasn't that long ago in this story that the charcoal would have reminded us of Good Friday, of Peter warming himself by the fire, fearful, scared, on the edge, and living in denial.

But now we are in Easter. Now we have heard Jesus calling him to a new life of following him once more. Now we know this fire to be a sign of Jesus' forgiveness. What a relief, a joy it would be for Peter if every subsequent time he smelled that charcoal he remembered it not as a sign of his fear but as a reminder that he was forgiven and led into a life of following Jesus.

And at one point in our story, we would have known water only for its destruction, for chaos. But now we are in Easter. Now we have heard Jesus calling us to a new life through him and the waters of baptism. Now we know this water to be a sign of Jesus' victory over death that he shares with us now and always. What a change, a joy it can be for us if every time we encountered water in this world it reminded us not of destruction and chaos but of baptism, our *our* baptisms, that we are baptized people called to live into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Where there once was fear, we now know faith. Where there once was despair, we now know hope. Where there once was death, we now know life. Peter knew this story well. Xiomara and Liam will come to know it very soon! Thank God for the victory we have through Christ Jesus, he who turns our sorrow into joy, our fear into courage, our death into life.

Amen.