

Why Are You Here?

“She’s been dead over 30 years now,” you say as you step on the gas, moving through the intersection. “30 blasted years and still, whenever I want to turn off my alarm and just roll over in bed and not have to be anywhere today, I can hear her over the phone ‘I didn’t see you in church today, sweetie. Something the matter?’ No mom, I just wanted a lazy day. ‘Well don’t you get too lazy now.’” And you can still hear her eyebrows raising on the other end of the line, before making sure you know there’s family dinner tonight. Not only is she able to guilt you 30 years later, but she’s got you talking to yourself in the car too. You might want to see someone about that.

Maybe your guilt complex isn’t quite this strong, but some of you are here today because you feel guilty if you’re not here.

What about the rest of you? Why are you here? Why did you get out of bed and choose to come here on this particular day?

For some it’s habit. Sunday comes after Saturday, and on Sunday after you eat your porridge, you brush your teeth and your hair and you make 3 lefts to get to church.

For some it’s the community. Both before covid and maybe especially during covid, here’s where you see people you know and love, where you catch up with your people. Where you depart from before going for brunch.

For some it’s searching—you’re looking for meaning. In your days, in your life, in the world, the pieces don’t make sense as a whole yet and there’s a meaning behind church that’s supposed to hold an answer to these.

For some it’s duty. You volunteered once and you’ve got yourself roped in and now you feel you can’t step away because you’ve got a job to do.

I resonate with all of these, at some point in my life. We know that some reasons are better than others, some reasons are good, some are maybe even verging on bad, yet I’m not here to trample

on a single one of them. I just think it's a good thing to stop and reflect, asking the person in the rear-view mirror why they made the trek in today?

In our Gospel lesson the people are flocking, swarming towards Jesus, and it's intriguing—they aren't pushing and shoving to get a meal or even receive a miracle; they're surrounding Him to hear His teaching. They push and shove to get closer and closer until He's calf deep in the water, so rather than teaching with his shoulders below the surface, He puts some distance between Himself and the crowd and hops into a boat—Simon Peter's boat, if you can imagine that. They sound like good students, so I can only imagine them clinging to His every Word, taking in proclamations of God's mercy and justice, mulling over parables, and yearning for the fulfillment of God's promises, for this Kingdom of God to finally arrive.

I hope that, for each of us, part of the reason we are here today is to hear Christ teach. I'm not naïve; I'm perfectly aware that we all have multifaceted motives for walking in through those doors and taking our usual seats—our reasoning even changes week to week. But I hope and pray that, as life continues, as you grow in the faith, that the heart of this crowd is integrated into your life, and mine.

Everyone else has come to hear the teacher, but Simon has been roped in. After a long night of pointless fishing, hours of sweating, waiting, and worthless repeating, the crew had called it a night. But while the rest are finishing the clean up, Peter was called by Jesus to ferry Him out a little-ways. Which means he gets the best seat in the house for the day's lesson in Jesus' school. So maybe it's the wisdom he's heard, or the promises of God that have encouraged Peter, maybe it's just to humor the teacher to show Jesus that He better stick to teaching and leave the fishing to him, but Peter caves. When Jesus asks Pete to undo the hard scrubbing done already and dirty a net again, casting it out against all wisdom—because professional fishers don't clean up when the fishing gets good—Peter says "Sure. At your word, at your wish, at your command, I'll throw it out. If it were anyone else we'd be back to shore to dock the boat and hit the hay, but if you say it, Jesus, we'll give it a try."

And of course, when Jesus says throw the nets, it's not in vain. We don't know it yet in Luke's Gospel, but when He commands to demons to leave, they're gone. When He tells the sick to be healed, they're leaping and laughing like kids again. When He says to keep handing out the food, there's still food to spare; when He says sins are removed, they can't but fall from a person's guilty conscience. When He says the Son of Man must suffer, die, and be raised on the third day, well, you know that's going to happen. At Christ's Word, it happens.

This futile fishing attempt ends up outdoing all that they would've caught all night long. The nets are snapping, the boats begin sinking, and literally with all hands on deck the men are just barely able to contain the haul, but in the midst of the chaos Peter becomes useless to the crew.

Now Peter knows that this man, teaching seemingly heavenly wisdom, He's no mere wiseman sent by God to explain how the world and the kingdom ought to work. He knows that this man who healed his mother isn't just doing God's bidding. He's not talking about a future kingdom coming, about the Messiah who will eventually arrive, of salvation that will come about. He is talking and teaching about Himself, and like Isaiah, once Peter realizes whose presence he's standing in, he can't stand it. He knows that he's unworthy to be in the presence of true holiness. Moses was allowed to see God pass by, and that was by God's mercy, yet he's been staring God in the face, watching His lips move, so surely this man with sinful lips, sinful hands, a sinful mind and heart, how could he not receive the full terror of God in any moment now? Why has this self-proclaimed sinful man been able to stand, talk, breathe so far at all?

Why were any in Christ's audience able to endure? As earnest as they were to hear Jesus teach, I know their closets are full of sinful skeletons, of moments they'd melt into the ground if they ever let Jesus hear of them. Why are you able to stand through the proclamation of God's Word, through His very presence with us, in spite of the very real sins you've committed, the very real sinfulness that you bear?

When picking the hymn of the day for this Sunday, I couldn't decide. We've got the grand holiness of God declared and realized, as we sing in "Holy, holy, holy" alongside the angels and all saints. But in our readings we all see how God has come to us, hidden under flesh, hidden behind word, and we see the purpose behind it all as well—He's here to bring about salvation. So Donna, mercifully, at my strange request, managed to merge "Hail to the Lord's anointed" into the other hymn. With this strange juxtaposition between the human and the divine, of the just and the merciful, of God's power and His compassion, we begin to understand our God—His character, His will, His mission.

God was on that boat, proclaiming all He was doing in the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. God is here this morning, too. We don't gather to hear teachings about Him, but to hear Him teach. We don't come close to ponder His proclamations and His promises but to receive them from His very lips. We don't simply walk through the doors to remember what has been done for us, but to receive His absolution, His blessing, His life, His cross and resurrection anew.

This is why you are here. Whatever psychological reasoning you may have as to why you got dressed and drove here, they're secondary to the fact that Christ's Word has worked on you and in you. Christ has gone fishing and has caught you alive. He dragged in your dead and dying self and breathed new life into you. This is what He was doing to those on the shore, to Peter in the boat—His Words were proclaiming grace and salvation and hope so that many would be caught in the net of grace and dragged into the boat of His church, and to prove to the fishermen that He's got the power to make them fishers of men, He causes a haul so big that His power and goodness are simply undeniable.

We're beginning to look at stewardship, about how we make good use of what we've been given as God's children, and I think this is the most important place for us to start. Before we look at money or talents or projects we'd like to tackle, we must understand why we are here, and it is nothing other than this. Christ showed up in mercy. He came to demonstrate God's compassion to His creation, taking on their pain, entering into and stealing away their sin, enduring their death, and by His effective

Word drawing many into this gracious reality. This is why the Church exists. This is why you put on pants this morning. And this is why we continue opening our doors and reaching out our hands and praying for those around us. We come here that we may be re-caught up in grace and that others may join us as well. That's it. And if we want to have a healthy grasp on anything we'd like to give or do or work towards, if we want today's AGM to have purpose, if you want your donation to go anywhere good, if you want anything to happen after this day, we must begin by appreciating what truly goes on here, and trust that it will carry on by God's will and grace alone.

Today you have been met by the Holy God of all creation, the one Whose Word caused the Sun to appear and mankind to form, who caused fish to swarm into the net, Who died on the cross to catch death in its tracks, rising from the grave to leave it dead eternally, the Word that washed away your sins, that placed faith in your heart, that spoke life, everlasting life into your days. This Word has caused you to not fall away this week from your sin or the world's temptations or the evil ones attacks but instead to come back for more grace. This Word has called you to be enlivened once again. This Word has been faithful to catch floundering fish through millennia and be merciful towards every one of them. This Word is your past, your present, and your unending future. This Word is your hope and your promise and the sole reason you will rest in God's strong arms through all your days. He is the reason you are here, that we are here today, and the only reason you'll enter the doors again. Come, receive Christ your reason. Come, for He has called you, sought you out, and indeed caught you.

Amen.