



SIEBENQUELL

The Wildness of God: The Way of the Holy Springtime IV

Jesus changes the direction we set ourselves



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Once Jesus has entered our space and staked a claim to our time, entirely unbidden on our part, he moves on to do something startling in its brashness. He changes the direction we set for ourselves. The moment unfurls itself in the very next two scenes.

»He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."« (Lk 5, 3-4).

Twice in these lines, Jesus changes the obvious direction Peter has set for himself. First, he asks him to »put out a little way from the shore«. This is the opposite direction Peter has set for himself. The weary fisherman has gone ashore. He is heading from waves and water to shore and home, from casting nets to washing them, from fruitless labour to well earned respite, from the hopeful possibility of filling his nets to the certain failure of empty nets. Jesus reverses that direction. Now he wants to shove off from the shore back to the waves and the water. He asks him to turn his back not just to the shore, but to his home and the rest for which his body aches.

Moreover, as soon as he is finished preaching, he asks Peter to move even further from the place he longs to go. »Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.« This is the hardest change of direction of them all, for here Jesus asks him to return to the place of futility and to resume the one thing that has brought him no success whatsoever, namely, letting down the nets again.

We all set our own directions. This is usually intricately woven with something on which we have set our hearts. When we are weary, we set our hearts on rest. When we are unsuccessful and frustrated, we set our hearts on times and places where we can leave those moments and experiences behind and embrace what lifts our hearts and spirits. We seldom voluntarily let alone happily return to the places of our failure. Instead, we prefer to return to the scene of our great successes.

In Mark 1, 35-39 Jesus heads out to a deserted place after writing a tremendous success story. On one Sabbath day he has healed a man with an unclean spirit, a feverish mother-in-law and myriads of people afflicted with every imaginable disease and affliction. Peter and the others hunt him down and tell him, »Everyone is searching for you.« They want him to return to the scene of his greatest success to date. But Jesus changes the direction. He does not want to return to the place of success. »Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.«

Even more telling is the story in which Peter tries to change the direction which Jesus sets. In Mt 16, 21-23 Peter takes Jesus aside, off the path he has taken. He reproaches him. This way leads Jesus to Jerusalem. There he will suffer and be rejected by the high priests and the scribes. In other words, Jesus is setting out on a path that will take him to where violence and abandonment await him. Then it becomes interesting. Because the text says: Jesus turned around. That means he now has Peter behind him, has him at his back. Then he looks at the disciples, because they are as affected by this scene as Peter is, and rebukes him. He makes a course correction.

Why is this necessary? Peter was the one who recognized Jesus as the Messiah and called him that. He is convinced that this Jesus has the words of eternal life. But now, when he has doubts about the way and the wisdom of the Messiah, he wants to take over the lead. And Jesus tells him through this word and his gesture: »Peter you should be following me. In order to follow, you would have to stand behind me. Let yourself be guided. Let me lead you on paths that you would not take. But this will only happen if someone else knows the direction, and therefore you must stand behind me. If you always follow the paths that you are already on, you don't need anyone to guide you. But if you want to experience something new, unexpected and untried, then stand behind me.«

Jesus leads Peter to the place where is invited to answer the question my friend John O'Donohue loved to pose: »Because I am here, where is it that I am absent from?« This is a place of awakening. Peter has tasted something of the grandeur of God, and dabbling at the side of the path will no longer satisfy him.

How does Jesus deal with us when we are not yet able or willing to walk in the direction he sets?

He corrects the attitude, but he does not send us away. He changes the direction, but he takes Peter with him.

This is the way Jesus breaks into our lives. He helps us to reposition ourselves, but does not write us off. He returns to the path of life, which will eventually lead to fullness. He clarifies the circumstances but does not terminate the relationship. He points out the right order, but not once does he say that we have no place in that order. The withdrawal of love is a human strategy and not a divine one.

When we do not have in mind what God has in mind for us and his world, then the order and rhythm of life is distorted. We human beings avoid the unpleasant, be it the places of our failure and empty nets or the places of rejection and violence. By nature, that is not the direction we set for ourselves.

Jesus turns toward these things and does not avoid them. Instead, he deals with them, he confronts these realities. When people try to avoid the path of life, Jesus clarifies how a healthy, life-enhancing relationship with God works.

Once more I return to a key theme of this Gospel story and of the 40 days of the Holy Spring. The fullness of fish, the fullness of life and its possibilities, will not jump into our boat. It must be drawn from hidden depths. If we do not follow the path of Jesus, if we do not heed his counsel and sidestep the encounter that so challenges the direction we have already set, we will not come to this moment of fullness.

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