

Two Fish Stories
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 Texts: Luke 5:8 and John 21:7

There is an Aesop's fable in which a satyr who upon interviewing a man decided that men were untrustworthy. And the proof of that is that men use their breath to cool the stew and, then, moments later to warm their freezing hands. Men who blow hot and cold in the same breath are, he concluded, obviously untrustworthy. The fallacy in his reasoning is easy to expose for we know, that breath is warm, not hot nor cold; therefore the breath which is the same, constant, can both cool the hot, and warm the cold, within limits, because breath is not extreme. So it is with 'faith and fear.' Picture them as extremes of hot and cold—as experience demonstrates either can be!—and between the two, we vacillate, according to our ability to choose between them: I can choose to be secure in my faith, or insecure in my fear all in the same breath.

Fear and faith then are the polarities we must consider when exploring the reactions of Peter to the Lord—first at a massive public event of the first miraculous catch, an event witnessed by many thousands. Peter's came under conviction of faith, recognizing the lordship and divinity of God in Jesus, in a hugely crowded circumstance, publicly—immediately following a teaching event. Then, after faith was birthed, planted as a growing seed, at the other end of Jesus' ministry, around a resurrection appearance to the disciples, there is a second miraculous catch of fish—153 fishes not counting those that Jesus had obtained separately and had roasting over a breakfast fire on the shore of Sea of Tiberius—a Gentile name for the Sea of Galilee. But, the second miracle differed from the first, in that Peter instead of responding in fear, responded in faith; instead of telling the Lord: **depart from me for I am a sinful man** threw on his garments, dived into the sea and swam one hundred yards to reach his Lord and Master. John reports (21:14) **This then is the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.** (v.14) These details (the Gentile name of the sea; the exact number of fish, the distances reported, the listing of Simon Peter; Thomas, the twin being the same who was told to place his hand in Jesus' side; Nathaniel, and two others (James and John most likely); the use of the ship's dingy) all support the first hand, authentic nature of this reporting. However, the first catch should be numbered among the veritable miracles that Jesus performed—despite which scoffers demanded yet another sign, another proof—**21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the [a]miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in [b]sackcloth and ashes.**—the second miraculous catch was less public. Yes, well-attested to, but, we may suppose, it served to bring to memory the former miracle—bringing the initial fear back into view as a thing supplanted by faith. Praise God! Faith is the antidote to fear . . . we should explore the origins of fear *in transgression, guilt and shame*. The fear I speak of is to be distinguished from the physical and instinctive reaction to imminent threat, or danger.

This takes us back to the dawn of the human race, to the opening chapters of human history to where in Genesis 3 to the temptation of the first couple. In Genesis 2 God says **16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not** [eat from

it] **eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.**" I think we all can acknowledge that this commandment—which proved burdensome for Eve and Adam—signifies a number of things, especially given the fall-out from its transgression: **you will surely die**. Was fear directly born of this? And was that fear coupled with guilt, shame and remorse? Did courage originate in our response to sin and its consequences? Adam and Eve fled God's presence out of fear *and that in itself is a little bit of dying*. **I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.** (v.9) Did he hide himself really? Was finding cover in the bushes a sufficient covering, or was the need for clothing begun here? Is nakedness really the correct motivation of fear in Adam? Or was the stain of sin such that the holiness of God could not abide it, and all three (God, Adam and Eve) understood that the instant separation was a little death? And sadly did we not then begin to realize our mortality, having never ceased dying since that moment in time? Whoever asks such questions?! And then you realize that many, many do so—even those amongst the multitudes that Jesus taught, and preached salvation to.

Therefore, perhaps, Shakespeare has Caesar say,

"A coward dies a thousand times before his death, but the valiant taste of death but once. It seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come." [*Julius Caesar* Act 2.2.1008-1014] This underscores the fundamental irrationality of fear! Remember the famous words from Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address: "The only fear that we have to fear is fear ... fear itself — nameless unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert into advance." (March 4, 1933¹)

You will surely die apparently did not mean "immediately" as in dying on the spot. But it does mean that through disobedience, through rebellion against the express command of God, that dying and death will be introduced. *This is the first instance of consequential judgment-hitherto there had been no reference to death and dying. It is an intrusion into the creation order.* Having no precedence is ambivalent. How are Adam and Eve to make sense of this unknown thing? *Do they know enough to be frightened of it? What had they to be punished for, if sin entered by this door?* Sin is imported to Eden. Listen now to Eve's re-iteration of the commandment: (Gen. 3:2-3: **We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden [The tree of the**

¹ "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

Recognition of the falsity of material wealth as the standard of success goes hand in hand with the abandonment of the false belief that public office and high political position are to be valued only by the standards of pride of place and personal profit; and there must be an end to a conduct in banking and in business which too often has given to a sacred trust the likeness of callous and selfish wrongdoing. Small wonder that confidence languishes, for it thrives only on honesty, on honor, on the sacredness of obligations, on faithful protection, on unselfish performance; without them it cannot live." FDR

knowledge of good and evil apparently had a central place in Eden] **God has said** [Note, not has commanded!] **You shall not eat, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.** {Note the unhappy amendment to the word of God, **nor shall you touch it.** See Revelation 22:**18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and [a]from the holy city, which are written in this book.**}

It never ceases to amaze me that there are those among us who are daredevils, in every sense of the word. There are those who participate in extreme sports, like sky-diving, skateboarding or walking a tightrope across a deep and dangerous gorge. They seem to thrive on the edge of danger, the adrenalin rush. Some occupations fishing, lobstering, sky-scraper construction have danger all over them! But spiritual recklessness has a much broader scope than these “brave” pursuits—in a way it is everyman’s pursuit.

Let’s consider then two accounts of miraculous catches—as they frame for us the life of Peter, one at the beginning and one at the end of his walk with the Lord on the earth. Jesus, on both occasions manifests the dominion first given to the first Adam and causes the fish to enter the nets of the disciples. These are precious examples of the Lord meeting men at their occupations, in their professions as fishermen—on the water which makes their place of work variable.

First Luke 5:8. Jesus is preaching the kingdom of God in Galilee, declaring that **for this purpose he had been sent.** (4:43) Now the text tells us that He was preaching this in the synagogues, but lots of ministry was happening outside the walls of the synagogues. People were being healed and delivered of unclean spirits *and crowds keep forming in response to this.* The point of the healings, deliverances and signs was a demonstration of the power of the kingdom of God being visited upon the people. But they needed the back story to all this: that it is a new day, and the power, influences and authority of God was breaking forth in a remarkable and unprecedented manner! The power of God was manifest in these events. Jesus withdraws for prayer and regrouping, the crowds seek to detain Him *so as to avail themselves of His healing presence.* IT follows naturally enough that Luke 5 would open with Jesus surrounded by **the press of a great multitude on the shore of Lake Gennesaret.** (5:1) **He saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets** (v. 2). Jesus gets into Simon Peter’s boat, pushed off from land and sat down to teach the multitudes. I keep pointing out the multitudes so that you would know that this is a very public event!

What follows is that after He has finished teaching, He commands the disciples to **Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.** (v.4) There is a great catch but we are not told what happened to it—is it possible that this great catch was meant to occasion a great fish fry on the shore, so as to feed the multitude? Is it at Bethsaida where 5,000 (mostly Jewish) are fed? The feeding of the 4,000 (mostly mixed Jewish/Gentile) near Decapolis is another mass feeding along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The first miraculous catch found Peter in the presence of his Messiah. He recoiled in terror, had a quick spasm of conviction, a deep realization of personal sin leading him to cry,

Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. By faith Peter believed that Jesus was God incarnate and the seed of faith planted in that first miracle grew and matured in him. So that by the time of the second miracle, Peter is able to find his ground, reverse direction and instead of running from forgiveness, love and acceptance, **he put on his robe, jumped in and swam one hundred yards to reach his master.**

And that is the journey that we as believers also have to make. Sometimes over and over again. We have to do the counterintuitive thing and run to Jesus when things go wrong. That is the way of salvation, that is how the blood comes to be applied.

Amen