

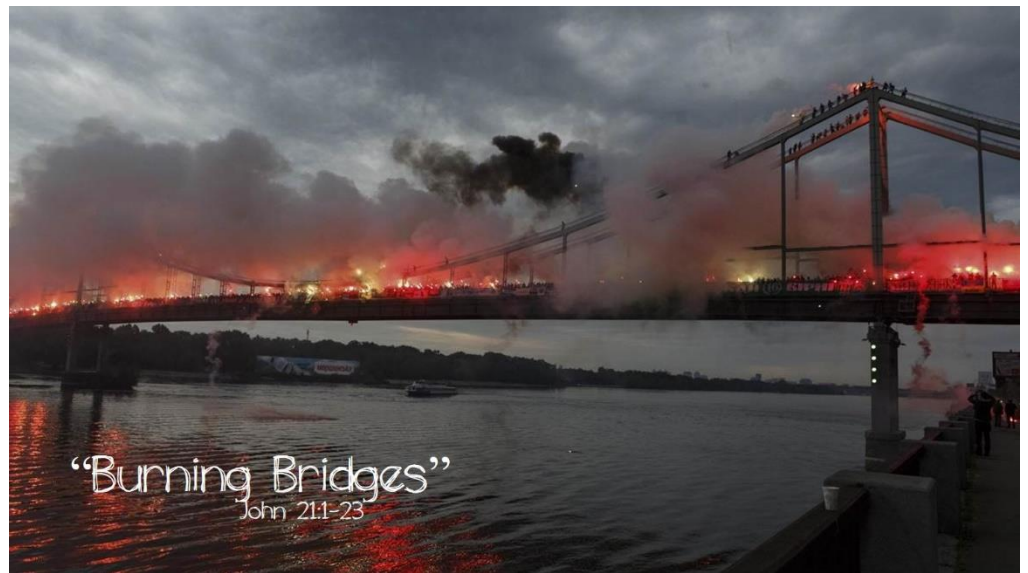
“Burning Bridges”

...John 21:1-21

by **Pastor Tim Dodson**
at **JF Believers Church**
in **Menomonie, Wisc**
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JOHN 21:1-23 *After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were*

together. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. 4 But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." 6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. 7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. 9 Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"—knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. 14 This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. 15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." 16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep. 18 "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." 19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me." 20 Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" 21 Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" 22 Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." 23 Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?"



Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. (Luke 17:32-33)

In Genesis 19 we read of God's destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as His rescue of Lot and His family. The angels of God were having a tough time getting Lot out of there. He was hesitant. He was fearful of life outside of the world he had known. There is no logical explanation for such. But apparently, even in the wickedness of Sodom there was at least the comfort of familiarity. Such, it seems, will almost always trump uncertainty and ambiguity. The angels pushed hard and instructed them all to run and to "not look back." Ah, but most of us are familiar with the account. As God rained down fire and burning sulfur upon the cities, we are told that Lot's wife did indeed "look back" and was "turned into a pillar of salt."

As much as we might desire today to move forward in grace, we find our past still pulls at us, calling us back to a place that we ironically often remember as warm and comfortable. It seems it is not enough to just recognize and regret our sin. To leave it behind, we must learn to hate it. Lot's wife was dragged free of her life of self-focus and was rescued from imminent pain and death...the consequences of both individual as well as corporate sin. Yet she still looked longingly and lingeringly on her past, even as it was being consumed by the fiery wrath of God. She didn't want to die, but she didn't really want to leave her old life either. And so she did what we all do when we find ourselves in that place. We hesitate. Often, we simply *stop*.

Many of us are "Lot's wife." We preserve deep within us the memories of sin savored in years past. We see it at least mostly for what it is...but we do not hate it. In times of physical, mental, or even spiritual loneliness, exhaustion, discouragement or despair, we inevitably reminisce. We dream a revisionist version of times past. One where we leave out the dark and painful consequences of our conduct and the inevitable trajectory of our lives. We fail to paint an honest portrayal of our personal history. We dream scenarios of re-engaging those times on some level. Even in our newfound and glorious freedom, the skeletal remains of our past remain hanging in our closets. It's behind a door that we pass each day of our lives. Sometimes we even crack the door a little and peer into the darkness on the other side.

Our story begins today with an air of near tangible weariness. No one could argue that the events of the week prior had been exhausting and knee-buckling. All the apostles had been run through the wringer in such a way as to never forget, albeit possibly never truly understand. Everybody was *tired*. The wave of doubt, emotion, and confusion would have rendered them nearly paralyzed...unable and quite unwilling to move. Like Lot's wife, they were stuck in their very steps.

Finally in this numbing state, Peter decides: "*I'm going fishing.*" So back to the beginning of the story...back to where Jesus found Him. Back again to his old life.

History and legend have much to say about this man Peter. Tradition described Him as a big man, with rough fisherman's hands. Older than the rest of the apostles, with a personality that made him both a leader, yet also often unpredictable. We find him *naturally impulsive* on the Mount of Transfiguration, and *tenderhearted and affectionate* when Jesus washed his feet in the upper room. He could be both *full of strange contradictions, at times presumptuous, and yet other times timid and cowardly* as he began to sink beneath the waves that day in the midst of the storm. He could be at once *self sacrificing*...having left his business and his world to follow Jesus, and then suddenly *inclined to self seeking*, asking Jesus in Matthew 19; "what's in all this for us?" He was a man *gifted with spiritual insight* ("...to who else shall we go?") but then in a moment *slow to understand the deeper truths* (Matt 15, asking for an explanation of the parable.) He was the embodiment of an enigma, and yet at the same time an "every-man." It seemed that all of it had now come to a head...he had come to the end of himself...*and he was done*. Peter was going back to fishing.

Jesus once told Peter; "*Peter, Satan longs to sift you like wheat...*" 1 Peter 5:8 warns us of the same saying "*Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*" Our text finds Peter awash in guilt, loneliness, and confusion. And in true human form, He doesn't move *in* at such a moment, but he runs just as we do. Back to our sin. Back to the world we knew before. Perhaps Peter had returned to fishing that day because he just didn't know what else to do. In his heart, it was over...it was done...and there was simply no fixing it. He had *failed* Jesus.

But then something wonderful happened. Something that so often and inexplicably happens at such moments. The last person we ever expect to find down there at our spiritual bottom is Christ. For the second time Peter casts his nets in disbelief, and pulls them up overflowing with fish. The first time was at his calling. "Follow me

Peter, and I will make you a fisher of men.” And now some three years and hundreds of miles later, Jesus meets him where he’s at once again. Then John utters those words that have echoed down through the centuries:

“It’s the Lord...”

My personal experience does not prove the text, nor does those of so very many men and women I have known through many years of ministry. However, for what it is worth, I believe John’s words were a tidal wave upon Peter’s soul. He could stand it no longer. He was at the crossroads. And if Peter was like so many of us that have followed, what occurred that day in that boat was more powerful and enduring than what even happened back at the beginning...back when Jesus first came to him. For in such a day our eyes are far more open... our minds far greater in our understanding.

Back in the beginning, we were like children, all wide eyed and star-struck. We took Jesus into our boats with hearts of awe. I don’t believe that we understood at that point what it all meant. We, like Peter, didn’t have any idea what the road ahead held for us. We didn’t understand the costs. We knew nothing of what it was like to be hunted by a roaring lion...stalked and persecuted by Satan and the world. But we also knew nothing about the power of being possessed by the living God. We were like children, not grasping what it meant to be a part of “turning the world upside down” or having ours turned upside down in doing so. John 14:18 promises us: “*I will not abandon you as orphans--I will come to you.*” I think John’s word’s sucked the very air out of Peter’s lungs: “*It’s the Lord...*”

Travis Kauffman, 31, was running on a scenic trail in the Fort Collins area on the afternoon of Feb. 4, (2019) when he heard a rustling of pine needles. He turned his head to see a small mountain lion about 10 feet away from him, and the lion lunged. He said that as he tried to throw the lion off of him, they both tumbled down a slope on a side of the trail. "From there, it was just a wrestling match," he said. Kauffman said he's about 5 foot, 10 inches, weighing between 150 to 155 pounds. Once he was able to get on top of the animal and pin its back legs, Kauffman said he tried to use his free hand to grab sticks to stab the lion's neck. But those kept breaking. So he reached for a large rock to hit it on its head. That didn't work either. He was finally able to maneuver one of his legs up, "and then I stepped on its neck and then was eventually able to suffocate it."

While this account amazed me, it was what the interview with Kauffman said next that impacted me the most. Because for most of us, we simply would have rolled over. I mean, this is a mountain lion, so I’m a dead man right? It’s finished. But Kaufmann said he had but a moment to decide...*fight or die*. He went into pure survival mode. He said he decided that he would not end on that mountain side that day.

The interview went on to say this: *Kauffman said he was reluctant to come forward publicly at first because he felt uncomfortable getting attention for a "situation of happenstance" and he "would never be able to live up to the reputation." "The story is bigger than my puny form," he said.*

Yes sir... **It always is.** And that was Peter at **that** moment on **that** day out on **that** boat. He was not going to end on that boat fishing like everything was just the same as it was before. Because things would never be what they were before. Things *could* never be what they were before. It was too late. Too much water under the bridge. Too far to go back. He knew too much, saw too much, experienced too much. In that moment Peter had to decide: run, roll over and die, or *fight*...

For all practical purposes Peter struck a match and tossed it aboard as he turned to swim to shore. There would be no more fishing for fish anymore. No...he was going to go now and truly be a “fisher of men.” As long as Peter had someplace to go back to, the temptation would always be there. As long as we hold onto that memory and reminisce about those “good old days” back in the world, it will always call us...it will always pull us backward.

On shore that morning, events played out to forever change Peter's life and path. Jesus did not soft-peddle Peter's calling and mission, He did not pat Peter on the head and tell him everything was going to be OK. Because everything **wasn't** going to be OK. In verse 21, Jesus speaks of things to come saying “*I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go.*” No, the road ahead would be no easier than the road behind, but Peter, “Do you love me?” At that point in our lives...when we all stand at that critical junction, we can reason out every aspect and question every element, but at the end of the day, it will always and only come back to that one question: “*Do you love Him?*”

We might have originally come to Christ because we were broken, or because we feared. We may have made that initial decision because of religious mores or family/peer pressure. We may have left our boat in the beginning because we were “wowed” by the miraculous we witnessed. But in the end...after our eyes have been opened to the reality and cost of following Jesus, we burn the bridge back to our old lives because of one, and only one, reason: ***Do you love Him?***

We have no record of Peter ever looking back again. It seems he was done with fishing that day. He was on a mission now. His mistakes were not over...his shortcoming had not vanished. But the “bridge of return” seems to have been burned. Verse 11 inexplicably gives us the exact number of fish caught that morning...153. That's extremely specific, even for the Bible. **153**. Why was that recorded for all of eternity? Because Jesus wasn't messing around. Peter...if you give up that fishing and come and follow me, I will overflow your life with not only what you need, but with the bounty of life itself. That's not a property promise but a 1 Corinthians 2:9 promise... “*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man, The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*”

When I think back over the years of ministry, my mind is flooded with the faces of those I have known and loved that stood at that moment of truth and have turned back, *and now they are gone*. Those “*who were once enlightened — those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come — and who then turn away from God...*” Heb 6:4-6

But then there are the faces of those I look out and see today that came to that moment, and they jumped. You jumped in and swam to Jesus...leaving your old life in the past and embracing a new life that rolled out before you. And today...well today you are here and for you your answer was ultimately “***Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.***” (John 6:68)

Perhaps, someone in our midst today, is standing in Peter's shoes...and this morning you wonder if there is a way to that kind of redemption. After all, this Christian thing can at times be so hard. You are looking back over your shoulder, and you are at this moment deciding whether to stay in your boat, or whether you will jump and swim. You too will run, die, or fight. Will your life end here?

“Peter...*do you love me?* Stop looking in the mirror, get out of the boat, and FEED MY SHEEP...”