

“Flashbacks”

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¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹

⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:1-19)

Maybe it felt like *déjà vu*, or perhaps it was more like a flashback.

Déjà vu – which in French translates “already seen” – is that sense that whatever is happening to us has happened before. It is more than a feeling that the current is experience is familiar. It is that whatever is happening is a little too familiar – that the recovery from our brain is underscored and punctuated in such a way that it is like history is recurring in the here and now.¹ That may be what Peter was feeling.

Or maybe it was more like a flashback, which is typically more traumatic. Those who have endured the horrors of war, or abuse, or some other experience of intense suffering can sometimes be carried back into those painful moments in an instant, as some stimulus in their present triggers a memory from their past. The stimulus could be small – as simple

¹ Julia C. Teale and Akira R. O'Connor, “What is *Déjà vu*?” <https://kids.frontiersin.org/>, accessed April 29, 2022.



as a smell like burning incense, the sound of a gunshot or a voice over a loudspeaker, or maybe they just pulled an old T-shirt out of the hallway closet and found an old feeling tumbling down upon them from some dusty top shelf in their memory. Or it might just be the anniversary of a painful event, and just the act of turning the page on the calendar brings that old pain around again. Whatever may trigger it, a flashback forces us to relive the past, even if we'd rather not.

This passage from John's gospel includes not one but two events like this. Two things happen in this early morning dawn on the Sea of Galilee that must have tapped into the recesses of the Apostle Peter's memory. The first involved fishing. Peter and the others had been at it all night, but the nets were empty every time they hauled them in. Then, just after daybreak, a man on the shoreline calls out to them. "*Try again,*" he says, "*only this time, cast the nets on the right side of the boat.*" They obey the strange instruction, and all of the sudden the nets were full – so full they couldn't even haul them back into the boat.

Peter had to have thought, "I have already seen this; I have been here before," because he had... way back in the early chapters of Luke... way back when Peter had just started following Jesus. The disciples had been fishing on the same lake... perhaps on that same stretch of shoreline... perhaps even in the very same boat... and they had been casting the nets and hauling them in and recasting the nets and hauling them in again – all to no avail. Jesus, who is with Peter in the boat, encourages them to go out further and try again. It seemed pointless, but Peter did it anyway, and they caught so many fish that their nets started to break. And that had been it – that had been THE moment when they left everything behind and started following Jesus for real. It had to have been a memory that had a special place in Peter's mind.

Now, years later, in the early morning just a short time after the first Easter Sunday, it had to feel like déjà vu, because so much was the same – the boats on the lake, the empty nets, the tired arms and frustrated spirits... and then Jesus speaks a word, and all of the sudden the nets are full again. Peter had already seen this. He had to have connected these two fishing adventures in this mind, and I have to think that is exactly what Jesus wanted Peter to do. I have to think Jesus wanted Peter to remember what had happened that first time, when Peter first began to see who Jesus was and what kind of power he had. In particular, Jesus needed Peter to remember the commission that Jesus gave him that day years before, when Jesus first said "*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.*" He wanted Peter to remember that day when he first accepted that commission... when he decided to drop everything and follow for real... that day when faith was new and young and energetic and the nets of Peter's life were full.

But that was not the only memory that came back to Peter in the early morning haze, and the second one was not nearly as happy. The second memory was a flashback to a night of trauma and pain... a time when Peter's faith was at its weakest, when his will abandoned him and his hope was all but gone. What brought it on? Maybe it was the smoky smell from the charcoal fire. Perhaps the one Jesus built on the beach to cook breakfast transported Peter back to that other charcoal fire, the one that burned outside of the court of the high priest on that fateful, terrible night. On that night, the night when Jesus was betrayed and arrested, it was cold, and the people standing around the court waiting to see what would happen built a charcoal fire to warm themselves. Peter, who had followed Jesus to the place, stood outside with the others while Jesus was being interrogated. Around the fire, a

woman thought Peter looked familiar. "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" she asked.

"I am not," Peter said.

Then others around the fire joined in. "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?"

Maybe the lie came easier the second time, or maybe it was harder. Either way, Peter denied it again. "I am not."

But the third interrogation was by far the most dangerous. It came from a slave of the high priest, a man who had come to the garden with those who arrested Jesus. He was even a cousin of the man whose ear Peter had cut off. This man was there. This man had seen what Peter did. He had seen Peter's face. His eyes squinted as he looked at Peter in the light of the glowing coals. "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?"

Again, Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Maybe it wasn't the smell of the fire that did it. Maybe it was the fact that Peter was being questioned three times again. Only the question was not, "Do you know him?" This time it the bar was much higher: "Do you love him?" And this time, the question came from Jesus himself.

When that question came for the third time -- "*Simon son of John, do you love me?*" -- the cock did not crow. But we do know that a deep feeling came suddenly upon Peter. The text says is that "*Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?"*" but I think what was really happening was that Peter dropped at that moment into the throes of a full-on flashback as the trauma of his greatest and most painful failure washed over him again.

And again, the flashback had purpose. It was as if Jesus needed Peter to remember – as hard as it was for him to relive those moments. Jesus needed Peter to remember that time when he stumbled over three questions in the dark night of Maundy Thursday so he could recognize the importance of the three questions Jesus was asking him in the daylight of Easter revelation. As he stood on the same shore where he had first said yes to Jesus, Peter also needed to remember what it felt like to say no to Jesus – not to make him wallow in his failure, but so that he could stand back up and make sure that never happened again. That initial failure was not the death of Peter's calling, but rather the resurrection of that calling in the light of the new day that Easter had brought. Peter was far from perfect – that had been proven clearly. But Peter was still the one that Jesus chose to be the rock upon which the church would be built. Despite his imperfections, Peter was still being called to follow, still being called to fish for people, still being called to tend and feed the sheep of Christ. The recalled pain of the denials in the dark of night was just what was needed to help Peter say yes in the light of day, and to brand and sear a renewed commitment to that ministry indelibly onto the heart of Simon Peter.

Back in 1862, the great preacher Charles Spurgeon looked at this same passage, and thought about these same flashbacks, and he saw in them a challenge for all of us who would ever dare to follow in the footsteps of Peter, the fallible man who tried so passionately to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The fisherman's task, Spurgeon preached, "is a rough occupation; no dainty fingers may come in contact with his nets. It is not a trade for gentlemen, but for rough, strong, fearless men, who can heave a rope, handle a tar-brush, or scour a deck. The ministry is not meant for your dainty souls who would go delicately through this world without a trial, an offence, an insult, or a sneer. Such work is

meant for [people] who know how to do business on great waters, and can go abroad upon the sea, not fearing the spray or the waves.”²

For whatever reason, God has always chosen to give this backbreaking and sometimes heart-breaking work to fallible, earthen vessels like you and me. At times, we handle it pretty well. At times, we hear and obey; we see and we follow. At times, we keep pressing on even when our arms are tired and our fingers are blistered and the easy thing would be to throw in the towel and abandon the nets on the beach.

But there are also times when we wish we had followed better... times when it just got too hard... times when truly following Christ would have required us to go down into some really dark and dangerous valley, and we decided we'd just rather not. In the life of faith, we all have memories of both successes and failures. There are good times when we feel like Christ is close and our nets are full, but there are also times when we cannot believe that we just made that same old mistake again... that we've just stepped into the same old trap again. In this regard, the experience of Peter is a gift to us – something planted in our own memories of faith – to remind us that God's grace is with us in good times and in bad, in times of strength and times of weakness. Peter's flashbacks not only help us to remember that we do not need to be any more perfect than Peter was to be part of God's plan, but also encourage us to keep tossing our nets and keep tending the sheep that are entrusted to our care.

We've seen how this promise works in real time over the past few days. Once again, LAC tossed its nets in the water with the Rummage Sale. Those nets have been in storage for a while during the pandemic. Some of you might have worried that they had rotted a bit from lack of use – perhaps dried out a bit too much. But you all got yourselves ready and tossed those nets out, and they have come back in once more with a full catch, and the money you have raised will feed the lambs at HOPE Community Services and put food on those who rely on the Larchmont/ Mamaroneck Hunger Task Force to put food on their tables. It will help tend the sheep who seek help from the CRC, At Home on the Sound, and Sharing Shelf. And it will help care for the sheep who are served by the STEM Alliance and the Washingtonville Housing Allowance.

For those of you who have been here a while, this year's sale might feel like *déjà vu*, even if you might have had some flashbacks during those days early last week when you wondered if you would ever get all the bags unpacked, all the items priced, and everything prepared to welcome our neighbors Thursday afternoon. Either way, this sale is now part of our collective memory of faith, and that can only be good in the long run of God's reconciling work. May these memories inspire us to keep saying yes to God, to keep following Christ as best we can, to keep feeding the sheep, tossing the nets, and fishing for people.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Two Draughts of Fishes,” preached April 6, 1862, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-two-draughts-of-fishes/#flipbook/>