

It had been a very long day, including the night before it. The night before, we flew across the ocean to Germany. Then during the day, we flew from Munich to Tel Aviv, landing in Israel in mid-afternoon. By late afternoon, we were on a bus, heading for the town of Tiberias. As night came on, we were steadily driving downhill. I wondered when we had dipped below sea level as we continued descending. By the time we were about to enter Tiberias it was dark. Our tour guide told us that the big black area without lights we saw below us was the Sea of Galilee. We actually were here: here, where so many of the events in Jesus' life and ministry had occurred. This was where Jesus called the four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, away from fishing to fish for people. Here, 700 feet below the level of the oceans, was the lowest freshwater lake on Earth, the place where Jesus' ministry had begun.

On the west side of Radnor Lake is a plaque with a quotation inspired by another lake. It comes from Thoreau's *Walden*: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."¹ I'm not sure what about lakes attracts me, but Thoreau's words about them ring true. No lake has ever captured my imagination more than the Sea of Galilee. In today's Gospel, it is called the Sea of Tiberias.

After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided among his three sons and his sister. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee, founded the town Tiberias around the year 20, and made it his capitol. Tiberias now has about the same population as Brentwood. Herod Antipas named it after Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor. The lake itself has had many names. In addition to being called the Sea of Galilee, in the 1st century, it also became known as the Sea of Tiberias, as we hear it referred to in today's Gospel.

Crater Lake, Oregon, which I saw for the first time nearly 44 years ago, was also a lake that I had longed to see. The surface of the lake is well over a mile above sea level. I have never seen anything so beautiful: the landscape was covered in seven feet of snow in early June. On a clear day when the

¹ *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 168.

lake waters are calm as they often are in the morning, when you gaze into it from a thousand feet above, it looks like a gigantic mirror. As you look down, what you see is mildly disorienting. It appears as if the blue sky is actually below you.

When I first saw the Sea of Galilee in daylight, it evoked similar feelings of awe. For one thing, the circumference around the lake is thirty some miles, similar to Crater Lake. And although Crater Lake is much more majestic, the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills and mountains, too. Even today, there is very little development along its shores except for the town of Tiberias. This lake where Jesus began his ministry and around which much of it was carried out is also very beautiful.

Along the northwestern shore of the lake at Tabgha, less than two miles from Capernaum, the home of Simon Peter and his family, is a site called the Church of the Primacy of St. Peter. This is the place where tradition says the events recorded in today's Gospel occurred - where spotting Jesus after their miraculous catch of fish, Peter jumped from the boat into the sea, waded ashore, and found Jesus cooking fish over a charcoal fire. This is the place where tradition says Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. After Peter answered three times affirming his love, Jesus told him to feed or tend his sheep. A church is built over the top of a large rock, which is called Mensa Christi or Table of Christ. For this is the place tradition says where Jesus fed his disciples bread and fish after his resurrection, near the same area where he once fed thousands of people bread and fish from a boy's lunch.

These miracles, as John's Gospel describes them, were signs - signs of the coming of God's kingdom, of God's benevolent rule in Jesus. They were signs that in the world's brokenness - its violence and lack of justice and mercy toward the downtrodden and oppressed - Jesus was proclaiming good news and bringing God's care. The powers-that-be might rule with a merciless hand, but in Jesus, God's hand was reaching out to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick.

What do you do with yourself after Easter? This seems to have been the question that the disciples faced. They had followed Jesus for three years. When Susan and I were in the Holy Land, our guide asked us how old we thought the disciples were when Jesus called them. He thought that they

were all very young men and basically unencumbered; otherwise, how could they have taken off to follow Jesus? Our guide said that Peter probably was the oldest since he was married, maybe 19. Now, Peter seems to be at a vocational crossroads. He decides to return to the familiar, to go fishing. When he announces his intention, six of his friends go with him.

An early morning fog typically hangs over the Sea of Galilee. Being a hundred yards from the shore, maybe this was the reason the disciples did not recognize Jesus when he asked them if they had caught any fish. After Jesus tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, they pull in a gigantic catch and recognize Jesus. Peter jumps into the water, and the six others follow with the boat and the net full of fish. Meanwhile, Jesus invites them to bring some of their catch while he offers them bread and fish cooked over a charcoal fire.

Peter had warmed himself over a charcoal fire when Jesus was betrayed and arrested. Three times Peter had been asked if he was one of Jesus' disciples and he said that he was not. Now Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, and Peter affirms that he does. After each of these responses, Jesus tells Peter to care for his sheep. Our reading concludes with Jesus saying to Peter, "Follow me."

Perhaps Peter had thought he was returning to his old life before he met Jesus. But now, Jesus calls him again. Specifically, he calls Peter to continue his work: to be a shepherd who cares for Jesus' sheep.

Five lines in a poem by T. S. Eliot seem especially eloquent as we reflect on today's Gospel:

"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."²

What had started at the Sea of Tiberias now had begun anew there. As the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed, "Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forward."³ Peter now

² T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," September 1942, www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliolittlegidding.html.

³ From Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, cited in jrbenjamin.com/tag/soren-

understood life backward and would live life forward.

The Pulitzer Prize winning writer John Updike shares the following testimony about his faith: “Early in my adolescence, trapped within the airtight case for atheism, I made this logical formulation:

1. If God does not exist, the world is a horror-show.
2. The world is not a horror-show.
3. Therefore, God exists.

“The second premise, of course, is the weaker; newspapers and biology lessons daily suggest that it is a horror show, of landslides and plagues and massacres and falling airplanes and incessant carnivorousness... Yet this and all bad news merits reporting because our general expectation is for good... The world is good, our intuition is, confirming its Creator’s appraisal as reported in the first chapter of Genesis...

“I found a few authors, a very few – Chesterton, Eliot, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth – who helped me believe. Under the shelter that I improvised from their pages I have lived my life. I rarely read them now; my life is mostly lived... What I felt, in that basement Sunday school of Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington, was a clumsy attempt to extend a Yes, a blessing, and I accepted that blessing, offering in return only a nickel a week and my art, my poor little art...”⁴ The church Updike wrote about, Grace Lutheran in Shillington, is in Pennsylvania and the ELCA.

There by the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus called Peter once again from his poor little art, his fishing. Jesus blessed Peter, and Peter accepted his blessing. Jesus called Peter to care for his sheep. That’s how Jesus blesses us today. He calls us to give of ourselves through our poor little art and follow him - beginning anew each and every day.

kierkegaard, “Either/Or,” 13 Monday, October 24, 2014.

⁴ From John Updike’s *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*, quoted in jrbenjamin.com/tag/soren-kierkegaard, “John Updike on Falling Airplanes and His Faith in a Fallen World,” 21 Friday March 2014.