

Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?

By: Meagan McLaughlin

August 22, 2021. After some of his disciples had turned back, Jesus asked the others if anyone else wanted to turn back also. Peter responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Sometimes turning back seems like it would be so much easier. Running away can be so tempting. But even when we are ready to quit, God will always be present.

Readings: [Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18](#), [John 6:56-69](#)

*** Transcript ***

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

We most often hear these words, as we did a few minutes ago, in a song as the prelude to our gospel reading, framed with alleluias, praising the God who we know brings life. I don't know about you, but in that context it is easy to sort of romanticize the phrase, experience it as a purely joyful introduction to the good news of the gospel that we just heard. I've often received it as a reminder that God's word brings life, as it certainly does. This gospel acclamation calls us, in not only the words but the dancing beauty of its music, to celebrate the promise of God in the words to come.

In our gospel reading today however, we have just heard this question in its full context, and as so often happens, the context changes everything. Peter and the other disciples have been following Jesus for a while, and as Jesus teaches them, some of what he has said has gotten hard. Yes, God feeds God's people, Jesus says. Knowing that is so important to understanding who God is. And, there is so much more. God brings abundance and life that often comes through and after struggle. The life that God provides for us embraces the confusion (I imagine the disciples were feeling that in spades today), pain, and even death, that is part of our human experience, and it carries us beyond that.

And some of Jesus' followers, hearing this reality, turned back. It was just too confusing, too hard, too much to take. Jesus asks the remaining disciples if they want to turn back also, and that is when Peter speaks these words. It's hard. It's painful even. And sometimes, turning back seems like it would be so much easier. But we've come so far already. Where else would we go?

When I was at a low point in seeking first call, this gospel reading came up in the lectionary, and my pastor at the time highlighted these words for me. In spite of the challenges, road blocks, and even heartbreak that the journey sometimes brought, my answer to Jesus' question had to be the same as Peter's. Not because it was easy, or clear, but because being true to myself, and God's call and direction in my life, was in the end the only option. Where else would I go?

And yet, as I suspect many of you have experienced, turning back or running away can be so tempting. It can seem like the best thing to do, for all concerned. As I mentioned last week, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King felt that way. Colleagues and friends in Minneapolis felt that way often last summer as they came together over days, weeks, and months to join the call for justice for George Floyd, and they continue to recover from the trauma and build community in new ways. And in 2014, soon-to-be Lutheran pastor and Ferguson uprising activist Elle Dowd felt the same way.

Elle has written a book, *Baptized in Tear Gas*, about her experience in Ferguson following the death of Michael Brown, and the many lessons she as a white woman learned from her black companions as

they stayed the course in the midst of the violence, grief, and discouragement they faced every day of that long year. On the November evening when the announcement was made that Michael Brown's murderer was to be freed without consequence, Elle found herself with peaceful activists fleeing from tear gas and flash bombs, and sought refuge at Christ Church Cathedral to change clothes and re-ground herself in the God who had transformed her over the many months she spent on the streets that summer and winter.

She writes:

And as we gathered around the altar, I noticed a young couple with an infant in a carrier. And I thought of the screams and clouds of tear gas from earlier that night, and I burst into tears as we prayed, thinking the world is ending. Worlds are ending and beginning all the time. And babies are still being born. It was only a month away from Christmas, where we celebrate the hope brought to us in the tiny baby Jesus. For me that night, that baby was a sign that God was with us. Even though things were as bleak as I had ever seen, justice felt far away, and we were all worn down and brokenhearted after going up against empire and losing, despite it all, that baby reminded me that life is stubborn and tenacious, and new life finds a way.

I think we're all feeling the weight of the brokenness of this world these days, in different ways. The reality of racism that reveals itself more and more in our country and our communities. The devastation of the earthquake in Haiti. The horror of Afghanistan, where the oppressive Taliban regime has taken over again. The reality of climate change, revealed in detail in recent reports. The grief and trauma of a pandemic, that not only hasn't waned as we'd hoped, but seems to be worse than ever, just in time for school to begin again. Add to that other natural challenges of life — illness, work, family circumstances, mental health challenges, death, and grief — and it can be too much to carry. I know there are some and suspect there are many, among us here gathered, who are wondering how to find the energy to keep going.

Jesus is telling his disciples he understands all of this. Jesus knows how hard the road is. He knows just how badly we want to quit, sometimes. And we know from last week's story of Elijah that God knows we may not be able to take another step forward until we take a step back and grab a snack and a nap. Jesus knows that some of his followers had already decided they needed to turn back, and he offers those left the same choice. And Peter responds.

Peter makes a choice, to follow God even when it seems impossible. Just like the people of Israel, led by Joshua, made a choice to serve God, and Elijah made a choice to rest and then continue the journey. Peter made a choice, to continue to trust Jesus even when it doesn't seem to make any sense.

All of these stories, from Israel to Jerusalem to Selma to Minneapolis to Ferguson, show us that we are in community if we are following God. Even when we are ready to quit, God will always be present, offering a snack and a nap. And there will always be someone among us who is ready to make the claim just when we can't: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Fall is a season of transition, leading us to new classrooms or schools, new routines, even change in the weather. It can be exciting, anxiety-producing, joy-filled, and overwhelming. Whatever challenges and hopes stand before you today, whatever griefs you are holding, whatever struggles seem too much to bear, whatever unknowns you face with fear, anxiety, joy, and anticipation, in this season, this promise is for us.

This claim of Peter's is so much more than a call to recognize the life to be found in our scriptures. In this passage from John, Jesus meets his disciples at the center of their struggle. And Jesus' presence, his question, and Peter's response is a profound reminder of God's presence, life, and abundance that holds true even when the road is so hard we want to turn back.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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