

“All of This Has Happened Before...”

Fr. Thomas Ryden

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Scriptures: Jeremiah 32:36–41; Psalm 33; Revelation 5; John 21:1–14

“All of this has happened before and will happen again.”

If you are as big of a nerd as I am, you will recognize this phrase as the repeated theme of the 2004 reboot of the sci-fi series *Battlestar Galactica*, hinting at the cyclical nature of stories, both imagined and real, and if you are paying attention, gives you a gigantic hint about where the series is going.

While we would rightly reject any view of history that included past lives, reincarnation, or karma, there is a sense in which, as the writer of Ecclesiastes states, “there is nothing new under the sun.” People, as it turns out, have always been people. They’ve acted like people, dreamed like people, wondered like people, destroyed like people. The turbulent 60s give way to the turbulent 2020s, the Great Depression gives way to the Great Recession. “All of this has happened before and will happen again.”

And so far, I have framed this idea negatively. “There is nothing new under the sun,” is a phrase that doesn’t elicit much hope in Ecclesiastes. It refers to the vanity of all things, the continued brokenness and futility of a world marred by sin.

But in this season of Easter, we are reminded this morning of another way in which history tends to repeat itself. This one is a little more positive. Scripture teaches us that while the struggles of this world persist and repeat, so too does the constant

love of God and his desire to be reconciled to his Creation and make it new. Just as surely as the world is broken, so sure is God's ability and desire to fix it. The Fall has meant a separation of humanity from God's Garden, but, as sealed in the promise of the empty Garden Tomb, God's New Creation Kingdom is breaking in. This is the pattern throughout the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation.

Take our reading from Jeremiah this morning. It begins:

"Now therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say, 'It is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine, and by pestilence':"

All of this has happened before and will happen again. In the people's telling of the tragedy of exile in Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem - that is of course the city that the text is speaking about here - they leave out an important detail: how it happened. It is the disobedience of the people and unfaithfulness to the Covenant that brought about devastation - an all too familiar story, from the time of the Judges until the time of Jeremiah. All of this has happened before.

But human weakness doesn't limit God - listen to what God says about a city and a people currently in ruins:

"Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will

give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.”

What does God desire for his people? He wants them to come home. We heard just a few weeks ago on Refreshment Sunday in our Gospel reading the story of the Father longing for his prodigal son to return home. We heard how the Father ran out to meet his son while he was still a long way away. This passage from Jeremiah describes that Father, the God who longs for his people to come home and be with him. The covenant made with Abraham had been broken and disaster ensued. God invites his people into a better, everlasting covenant. That is what God is like. He was like this before and he will remain like this forever.

And so it should be no surprise to us that when that God becomes flesh, he offers signs of this continued invitation, signs of God’s consistent and fervent desire to see us flourish.

The keen reader will recognize that our Gospel reading from today is an echo of the calling of the first disciples. Simon, Andrew, James, and John are called out of their boats in the first chapters of Matthew and Mark’s gospels, and Luke records a strikingly similar story of a miraculous catch of fish as he recounts their call.

And so you can probably imagine with me what must have gone through Peter's mind when he saw those nets creak once again when the resurrected Jesus suggested they cast out one more time. It was probably something like, "All of this has happened before and will happen again!"

Peter hadn't started the day in a great place. He had seen the resurrected Jesus, but he seems to be lacking any sort of directive on what to do next. Here he is, fresh off the news of the resurrection, the mission of Jesus' New Creation Kingdom in front of him, and yet he has no idea what to do. Jesus had appeared, but he didn't seem to stick around for very long. And Peter has to eat, so he makes a practical vocational declaration - I'm going fishing.

It makes sense enough. Fishing was his trade and Jesus hadn't told him exactly what to do next. Jesus was alive, but he wasn't even around. And Peter, as he proved to the servant of the high priest in Gethsemane just a few days ago, was a man of action.

But like so many of us, his taking of things into his own hands doesn't work out quite the way he had hoped it would. A grueling night of hard, honest work had yielded him nothing. And then, just as he's ready to call it quits and go get some badly-needed sleep, some know-it-all from the shore says to cast out one more time.

It is not clear when exactly Peter began to suspect that Jesus had come to him once again, but he should have gotten a hint at Jesus' words. And credit to Peter where it is due: for all the hasty action we see him take in the gospels, that enthusiasm does

send him running straight to Jesus as fast as he can, whether to an empty tomb or jumping out of a boat. The Master has once again made himself known to Peter in an abundance of fish, and Peter responds wholeheartedly both times. These two miracles of fish serve as fitting bookends of Peter's time with Jesus, signs of his calling and the consistent offer of a new way of life, not only for Peter, but for all who would believe in Jesus through Peter and the rest of the disciples' message.

And so I want to look a little closer at this interaction and the passages that follow and I want us to see in this offering of himself to his disciples one last time, how Jesus offers himself continually, not only to Peter, but to all who would put their trust in him.

The first thing we see in this passage is abundance. 153 fish. If you want to go down a deep rabbit hole, you can do some research on what people have thought that number 153 was all about. But that is a subject for another day. What we can say at the very least is that this is a reminder that the resurrected Jesus still does miracles. The signs of the kingdom, bringing healing, life, sustenance to God's beloved children, they weren't just things to propel Jesus to the Cross and Resurrection, they are signs of the new sort of life that is possible now that the Kingdom of God is breaking in.

I cannot think of a better refutation of gnosticism, the idea that we are truly only spiritual beings and the physical world is something we need to escape, than the resurrected Jesus cooking breakfast for his hungry friends. The spiritual work of redemption is done, and yet, he continues to bless the physical bodies of Peter and

the other disciples. The miracles of Jesus were not the advertising campaign to get the world to look at the cross and the empty tomb, but the signs of the New Creation he came to bring about. What has happened before, ever since the Creator injected life into the Universe, will happen again and again and again.

Continuing with the story of John 21 past our reading today, we see that along with abundance, Jesus perpetually offers to us forgiveness for the ways in which we fail to live in accordance with his New Creation. I am sure you are familiar with the story of how immediately after breakfast, Jesus and Peter have a heart to heart. Having met Peter's physical needs, Jesus seeks his further healing. There was unfinished business to handle: Peter's three-fold denial outside of the high priest's house, how he had abandoned Jesus when Jesus had needed him the most.

Fittingly, the forgiveness comes in a single question, asked three times: "Do you love me?" Peter seems to not get what is going on at first and so he grows a little frustrated by the end of things, but this was necessary work.

We too need forgiveness to walk in the way of resurrection. Far too often the thing that has happened before and will happen again is our own sinful choices, our own partnership with evil, our own selfish desires and actions. We have made a world of Exile. And yet, we are invited back to the heavenly city whose foundation offers forgiveness.

Jesus also gives Peter a mission. In response to each of Peter's declarations of love, Jesus has a job for him to do: "Feed my sheep." Peter's calling is of course that of a

pastor, to build up and lead the Church, but to do so primarily as a caregiver for the people in the Church. There is a whole seminar on leadership in Jesus' framing of Peter's vocation, but since we here this morning come with a host of vocations, I want to focus less on *what* Peter is called to do and more so on the fact that he *is* called to do something. In the same way that Jesus has been a blessing to him, from the first miraculous catch of fish to the one that had just happened moments before, Jesus tells Peter to go and do likewise in the world with the specific role and gifts he's been given. God is not content to end our stories at forgiveness. The tape doesn't end at salvation. The abundant life Jesus promises to Peter and to us involves a vocation and calling that brings blessing in a post-Easter world.

It is then here, at the end of the Gospel, that Peter hears the words from Jesus that the other disciples hear at the beginning of the story: "Follow me." Peter had been following Jesus, albeit imperfectly, for as long as just about anyone. And yet, even after Easter, there is more following to do.

We have the same call, and the same offer of new and full life in front of us. Like the promise made to Israel of a new city and an everlasting covenant, like the net full of fish and the chance to start over for Peter, we have available to us the abundance of the Spirit-filled life, the forgiveness of the Savior, and a mission in the world.

All of this has happened before and will happen again. Some of us are hearing about these things for the first time. Some of us have been here for a while and need a refresher. Some of us have tried and failed so many times we've stopped counting. In any case the offer stands.

That offer is for us and for the world! Some of you may have heard what I have, that there are studies and reports out there that suggest that Gen Z and younger generations are more open to the ideas of faith in God and religious commitment.<sup>1</sup> One author, Richard Beck, attributes this to what he calls “the Ache,” a sense that things aren’t right, that there must be more to life than what we can see, and a desire to tap into that reality. He writes on this subject in a fascinating book called *Hunting Magic Eels*. I was drawn to this quote, where Beck riffs on Nietzsche’s famous boast that God is dead, “God may be dead, but we sure do miss him.”<sup>2</sup>

What an opportunity! Young people, people of all ages are hungry for something real in a world of shallow and fake. In a world of devastation and destruction, talk of an indestructible city, and a new, everlasting covenant is a powerful thing indeed. So let us show them the way of Jesus, the way of life. Let us show them the abundance of a life lived in communion with God, not mere material abundance - that would be far too small a thing, but abundant living that means friendship for the lonely, provision for the hungry, comfort for the sick and grieving, and even hope for the dying. Let us show them that even the worst ways they have broken the commands of God are no match for his forgiveness. Let us show them that even they are called to mission for the good of God’s Church and world. That is a message that they would indeed recognize as good news. And let us not forget that we too need to be reminded of these things. What has happened before and will happen again? The goodness and mercy of God!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/gen-z-becomes-more-religious-survey-2060426>

<sup>2</sup> Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels*, 43.