

A Surprise by the Sea

Scholarly consensus puts the writing of John's gospel between 90-100 AD. John is referred to in the biblical texts as



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“the beloved” or “the disciple Jesus loved,” and there is a stronger sense of intimacy in the telling of this gospel. Consider also that John, who outlived the other apostles, had witnessed the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost, the spread of the gospel across the empire, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and had been exiled to Patmos where he wrote Revelation. John also uses philosophical language, but turns to actual events to capture our imagination as he applies a theological truth to life.

John's gospel has two endings. The first comes in chapter 20, after Thomas comes face-to-face with the risen Christ. John writes that there is much more to tell, more miracles and signs, but he has written enough for you to “have life in (Jesus) name.” (John 20:30-31) But John goes on to add a postscript, one more story pointing to the future in which Christ continues to be with his disciples in the world.

We cannot pinpoint the actual date for this breakfast Jesus had with seven of his apostles on the shore of Galilee (Sea of Tiberius). It was obviously after his appearance to Thomas and the normal journey to Galilee would have taken three days from Jerusalem. Pentecost has not yet happened. The apostles are not sure what comes next, what it means to follow Jesus when he is not with them every day as in the past. There is no job description, no long range plan, no budget. So it makes sense that, in the interim, those who were commercial fishers could return to their businesses and wait for some kind of sign or direction. It will certainly come in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but at that point none of them had the answers. Can you imagine their fears and uncertainty after spending every day with Jesus for three years? They needed to know Jesus was with them!

So, there they are back home in Galilee: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John and two unnamed apostles (12:2). They have been fishing all night with no success. Did they need the money? Were they filling the time with what they knew until a new chapter of ministry was to

begin? Or, did they think the excitement was past and the future uncertain? It was dawn, sunlight pushing the shadows aside and reflecting off the water. The fishers were exhausted after a frustrating night and empty nets.

A figure stood on the shore, caught in the shadows and light, and they heard a voice that sounded familiar: “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” “No.” Again, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some” (vv. 5-6). Immediately, their nets were so full they nearly broke. The “disciple whom Jesus loved” said to Peter, “It's the Lord” (v.7)! Peter jumped into the water and swam to shore as the others dragged their full nets (153 fish) to shore.

Jesus was waiting for them with fish and bread cooking on a fire. Jesus invites them to bring some of their fish and join him. John records Jesus saying, “Come have breakfast. None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord” (v. 12). Was this similar to Mary's failure to recognize Jesus at the garden tomb (20:14)? Is this a reminder that seeing is not always believing, that the seven are still struggling to grasp the full meaning of the resurrection? Are they, like Thomas and the rest of us, more certain of their faith sometimes, yet subject to uncertainty?

They are far from Jerusalem, the future is still a mystery, and they may be slipping back into the old familiar life. This is no parable, but the truth we all go through in time of stress and uncertainty that cloud our faith. Could it be that those disciples who often seem to us as spiritual giants are actually very much like us? Knowing John's experiences and his clear devotion to Jesus, I see this story contrasting with all he recorded about Jesus, as the reminder that our Savior is with us in all the experiences of life. Jesus was with them on the dusty roads and in the towns of Judea and Galilee, with them at the cross and in the garden and with them around a breakfast fire on the shore of Galilee.

Matthew 28:20 concludes its account with Jesus' final command and promise to his followers: “I am with you always even to the end of the age.” Wouldn't it be grand if Jesus showed up on your doorstep or lakeside property and invited you to breakfast! How different must life be to merit such a revelation? We

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April 30, 2017

Scripture: John 21:1-14

can ignore those disciples' questions and uncertainty and understand how important this surprise visit must have been. But think about it. Christ is with us every moment of every day, not as a limited physical presence, but in the person of the Holy Spirit. This timeless promise is not qualified by the enormity of your need or the strength of your faith. The companionship of God is his gift, his promise, his grace. You need that just as much as any of those first disciples.

Jesus' invitation on the shore of Galilee called those apostles into a fellowship of life. This experience was only one of many when they would find strength and direction in their Savior. I wonder, as they sat around that fire, with Jesus serving them bread and fish, did they remember that day when Jesus fed the multitude with a young boy's lunch (John 6:3-14)? Were they thinking of that Passover meal in the upper room in Jerusalem when Jesus offered them bread and wine as shambles of his ultimate gift (Matthew 26:26-29)? It is in our praying, studying God's Word and worshiping that we discover God as close to us as did those apostles that morning by the seaside.

John may have placed this story at the end of his gospel for two reasons. One was because the early church was threatened by the false teachings of Gnosticism which claimed Jesus was not flesh and blood but a spirit that took on a physical form. They taught that the physical world and the spiritual have no connection, which denies the truth of the cross and resurrection and dismisses any connection between a spiritual life and morality. But John shows us the Jesus who is real before and after the cross, the Jesus who is always with us.

The second reason is that, like those first apostles, we will go through times of fear and uncertainty, times when we don't have the strength to move forward, and Jesus will be there to guide and empower us. There are times we need our Savior, and he will always be there to comfort, strengthen and encourage us. This is the promise of Easter.

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