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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21
Vignettes: What Now?

The title of the sermon is “What Now?” It could be “Now What?” which says the same thing with a different nuance. One can reach the other side of the river and say, “what now” meaning we have reached the other side; what now shall we do. We can reach the other side of a river, see a desert before us, and say in an exasperated way, “now what?”

My first vignette is something that happened, or did not happen, during the Easter Sunday worship service. Remember, we began the sermon with a discussion of Hi Qi’s Easter picture. I am not sure I am pronouncing Hi Qi’s name correctly. In the discussion, Jan pointed to the picture at the bottom right. We described the picture accurately but I said we would get back to it but never did.

What I meant to say then was that this picture is the “what now?” or “now what?” picture. Jesus is dead and the disciples go back to fishing but their primary question is “what now” or “now what?” Fishing seems to be a temporary activity. They continued the amazing ministry begun by Jesus, especially Peter, in the Acts of the Apostles. Perhaps some of them went back to fishing but they would continue ministry as fisher folk in the line of the spiritual practice today with the prayer group after worship. We will look at the “The Practice of the Presence of God” where all of life is prayer or ministry.

We are post-resurrection people and the questions, “What now” and “Now what” are or should be constantly on our lips. It is a consciousness. When we walk out of the building today, we look at the world and say, “what now” or “now what.” Now that we have heard the good news and energized by the worship service, what can we do to contribute the building of God’s realm? How can we be God’s loving, caring and compassionate agents in the world?

The second vignette is a response to the gospel reading and an insight from Dostoevsky’s book *Crime and Punishment*. Both scriptures today draw from the lectionary. The first highlights the importance of “love.”

Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments... They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Love is central to the commandments.

The “what now” of this passage calls us to love. It is encouraging to say that we are about love in the world; but what of its efficacy? How would loving others make a difference? We have concrete proof in Dostoevsky’s novel. The protagonist Raskolnikov is twisting and turning after he commits a horrendous crime and he wants to push everyone, his friends and family, away from him so he might wallow alone. One could think that he so hates himself that he pushes others away.

He says, “I’m wicked, I see that,”...”But why do they love me so, when I’m unworthy of it! Oh, if only I were alone and no one loved me, and I myself had never loved anyone! *None of this would be!*” In other words, he would not be searching his conscience; he would not be facing up to himself and taking responsibility for the crime. In the end, it is love that saves Raskolnikov. Love heals and restores. Just keep loving friends and family, in good and bad times, and love will win in the end. One can understand now Jesus’s great insistence for us to love.

The third vignette emerges from the middle of my vacation/sabbatical. I travelled into San Francisco to see two movies at the Kabuki Theatre as part of the San Francisco International Film Festival. Is film viewing a vacation, sabbatical, or study leave event? For me, it is all three. Good movies theologically interpreted are as valuable to me as reading theological treatises.

I hopped into my car at midday and everything in the world cohered in a marvelous manner. I was in a mystical state. The trees, clouds, sky, people in other cars, everything was unified and in harmony. I saw no separation between the world and myself. I was in an excellent place. It happens from time to time.

I arrived in the city and drove around a few blocks in a neighborhood looking for parking. I was in a middle lane, suddenly went to make a left turn, and darted in front of an SUV whose driver honked irritatingly at me. I stopped to block his way and he continued to honk his horn. The stubborn part of me sat there for additional seconds and he continued to blare his horn. I gave him the peace sign, which in South Africa could be interpreted as another sign, turned into the side road and the other driver fumed on his way.

By this time, my mystical world was shattered. I felt discombobulated, irritated, and mostly disappointed with myself. Thank God, there were no traffic officers to see my recklessness.

I had a serious “what now” moment. I found a parking spot and walked to the theatre. I had to find a quiet place to get my center back. Fortunately, there was a seat and table in a darkened area in the theater where I sat and meditated. It took about 15 minutes and a post-meditation prayer to get back into sync. I prayed for myself and the other driver and hoped that his day would not be too upset by the incident.

I'm glad that the prayer practices we do on the fourth Sunday each month and our own practices during the month could kick in at this crucial time of my life. I hope the same for each of us.

My final vignette, is my theological response to the Peter passage read earlier. This is one of my favorite passages because it gives us a significant glimpse into life on the other side.

The key section is this: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water."

Other versions of the Bible state that Christ preached to those in prison since the time of Noah. We know what happened in the days of Noah. The story says the whole world was corrupt and full of violence. God decided to wipe out the world with a flood. Only faithful Noah and his family and every kind of animal were saved. The Peter text implies that the consequence of humanity's persistently evil ways in the next life is imprisonment.

Hell is imprisonment as it is in this life. Their prison will be themselves, their own selfishness, darkness and guilt; you name it, until they see the light of Christ's love and caring. According to Peter, they will have another chance to respond to God's love for what does Jesus preach. It is what all sermons are. They encourage us to be about salvation, that is, to be aligned with God and to be and do God's good news of love, peace, compassion and justice.

I remember being with a group of pastors at a breakfast meeting. We discussed this text and a pastor from the most fundamentalist, hell, fire and damnation church in town said that God would never give us another chance after we died. To the contrary, I pointed out what seems to be clear evidence from this text. He didn't see the text that way.

I turned to an old Italian, Catholic priest whose name was Mario. I said, "What do you think, Mario?" He gestured with his open hands and said, "It is a meestery." Mystery, indeed, but a clear statement from Peter.

What now? "If you love me," says Jesus, "you will keep my commandments... They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

What now/Now what? In summary, we love ourselves and others and seek greater revelations of Christ in the world. Amen.