

I spent the beginning of last week at convocation with the other pastors, and although the presenter was engaging and informative, the most valuable time I spent there was taking two long walks and having two long conversations with colleagues whom I've known for years. They know me well enough to notice when I don't really answer a question, and they care enough to circle back and ask it again—not because they're being nosy or intrusive, and not even because they really need to know the answer, but because they know they're helping me to work through the problem by talking it out. My hunch is that when the God of the universe asks a disciple the same question three times in a row, it's to help that disciple, not because God doesn't know the answer.

If we go all the way back to Exodus, we'll find Moses in a heated discussion with a burning bush as God commissions him to free the Israelites from Pharaoh. As Moses is arguing against this plan, he asks, "Who am I supposed to say sent me?" And God says, "I Am Who I Am...tell them I Am sent you"...and forever after we knew who God was: the great I Am. So in John's gospel, when we find Jesus making I Am statements: *I Am* the good shepherd; *I Am* the gate; *I Am* the bread of life; *I Am* the light of the world; *I Am* the resurrection and the life—we should recognize Jesus telling us who he really is—the Son of God, *I Am*. Yet after all those times that Jesus says *I Am*, when Jesus is arrested and Peter is asked not once, not twice, but three times if he is one of Jesus' disciples, Peter answers "I am not."

Although Peter is one of only two disciples who were brave enough to stick close to Jesus during his trial, when Peter is asked out-right if he is a follower of the condemned man, his survival instinct kicks in, and he says—three times—*I am not*. I don't blame him; after all, people do bizarre things in Jesus' name all the time that make me want to say, "I am not one of *those types* of Christians—I am not with *them*"...and the stakes are nowhere near as high for me as they were for Peter. So when things start to look dire for Jesus, Peter puts as much distance between them as he can, and we hear the funny little detail that John includes in his story: when Peter denied Jesus outside the house of the high priest, he was warming himself by a charcoal fire.

In today's story, Peter doesn't even wait for the boat to dock before he jumps out to get closer to Jesus. And when he is questioned beside, again, a charcoal fire, Peter reverses his

denial. When the resurrected Jesus asks Peter, three times, “Do you love me?” it’s not because Jesus doubts him. Jesus isn’t testing him or making him do sufficient penance for his sins. The Great I Am, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, doesn’t keep a record of wrongs or require anything from us for forgiveness. But Peter, who was being sent on a mission to feed Jesus’ sheep, had to know that Jesus had more faith in him than he had shown in Jesus. John tells us that Peter was hurt when Jesus asked a third time “Do you love me?” ...but we have to wonder if Peter was hurt because Jesus asked or if Peter was hurt because he was ashamed of himself. Jesus doesn’t punish Peter for his fear; Jesus helps Peter rebuild his faith by giving him as many chances to profess his love as the crowd had given him to deny it. Peter already had Jesus’ forgiveness and Jesus’ faithfulness; now Peter can forgive himself and lean not on his own faith but on the faithfulness of his Lord.

Peter’s new job was to take care of those who would be left when Jesus ascended to heaven. That wouldn’t be easy for Peter who, tradition tells us, was crucified upside-down, so as not to give the impression that he considered himself worthy of dying in the same manner as Jesus. How Peter could go from denying even knowing Jesus to boldly witnessing and even being martyred for Jesus? It took this moment of healing and restoration. Peter had failed, yet Jesus commissioned him anyway—and gave him the hope and healing he needed to live out that mission. Again, the stakes are nowhere near so high for us, living as we do in a society where Christianity still enjoys such privilege, yet the call is the same: we also are sent to tend sheep; that’s the meaning of Jesus’ invitation: *Follow me*.

All throughout the Easter season, we begin our worship with thanksgiving for baptism to remind us that through the death and resurrection of Christ, we are ever being made new. Each night we lie down having sinned by what we’ve done and by what we’ve left undone, by harming instead of helping God’s lambs, or by ignoring them altogether. But each morning God raises us up with a renewed chance to serve. As many times as we choose to deny Jesus’ way, Jesus forgives us, restores us, feeds us, and calls us again to follow. When God asks if we’re ready, and we say, *I am not*, may we remember that we don’t have to rely on the strength of our own faith. We are enlivened by the Spirit of the One who is faithful to us, who hears us say *I am not*, but who forever says *I Am*.