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An Upstream Journey

One of the most fascinating, documented, revered and studied journey stories is that of Salmon. The fish now synonymous with bougie brunch specials (think smoked salmon benedict) has long been associated with spiritual ceremonies, wisdom traditions, and most significantly of all, nature documentaries. How many of you have seen the salmon runs (most likely from the comfort of your home on a brightly colored screen)? The glistening schools jumping in and out of the water as they make their way upstream. Complimented by the soft soothing voice of a narrator and the serene meditative sounds of rushing water and babbling brooks? Today, though, with increasingly hot temperatures, out of control fires, constant droughts, harmful pollutants, and continued human interference upon our natural world, many of the rivers the salmon once used for their migration have either dried up or been blocked by dams. Which is why for the past few decades many of Northern California's salmon have made their journeys to the sea by way of a radically different route.

Now, if you have not yet been captivated by the alluring narrations and violent scenes that make up the infamously documented salmon runs, let me give you a bit of background. Salmon begin their life and journey in riverbeds, as fertilized eggs. After hatching in the safety of a freshwater gravel bed in a lake or river, the young salmon begin to make their way out towards brackish estuaries and the salt waters of the ocean, where they will develop and grow. Once of age to begin reproducing, about 4 years, they will begin the final stretch of their journey making their way back towards their birth place, fighting upstream, against currents, predators, even jumping up and through waterfalls. It's really quite an amazing and magnificent feat. With the last leg of their journey taking them all the way back to their original gravel bed, where they will spawn a new generation of Salmon continuing the cycle and the journey. In Northern California though many Salmon begin their journey to the sea, not via inlets or estuaries, but instead by way of tanker trucks. Being driven over 100 miles away from their birth place, at the hatchery. Down highways and byways to finally be spilled out the back end of the tanker tube out into the ocean. And, while this all feels very rude, unnatural, and inhumane, the thing of it is; just like the salmon fertilized and born in a riverbed whose natal (birth place) location is somehow imprinted in their very being, allowing them to return to that same gravel bed where their life began years before, these salmon bred in a hatchery have that same innate skill to make their journey from the sea where they arrived via truck, back to the hatcheries where they first came from.

In our passage from Luke today, Jesus is on his own upstream journey, as we are told "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Luke 13:34). And, while all three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke include Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem, Luke's Gospel is the only one to dedicate 10 chapters, a whole third of the book, to this arduous and seemingly interminable journey. A journey that takes Jesus and his disciples through hostile areas, we are told, like Samaria. Where they are of course rejected, because as you may remember from our Good Samaritan story, Samaritans and Jew's were not on good, or even speaking, terms. Nonetheless Jesus is determined and resolute in his purpose, to touch and heal and gather up as many lives as possible, and his journey towards his final destination, the cross.

The interesting thing to me about Salmon, and their journey, is that all of their work and struggle to make their way back to where they started is seemingly for nothing. Because, once they reach their final destination, the gravel bed of the stream or lake where they themselves were born, that's it. At least in the case of the pacific, californian salmon, after the females lay their eggs and the males fertilize them, they die. And, the cycle begins again.

Our passage from Luke, at first glance, is a seemingly harsh and definitely hard pill to swallow. As Jesus demands from those whom he calls to follow him, "Let the dead bury their own dead", and "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Families and friends need to mourn those who have died, and farmers need to be able to see that their rows are plowed straight and their seeds properly sown. That's what makes Jesus' words so hard, because they are opposed to our worldly sensibilities. Which really is the rub of discipleship. It requires that we join in the hard and arduous journey that is constantly looking towards the Kingdom of God. Because we like the salmon, are also imprinted with that place from which we came. Just as we are created in the image of God, we come forth from God, and God's kingdom. That kingdom we are constantly struggling to return to, and are constantly being drawn away from. Not because this world is evil, or we as humans are sinful. But, because we have a choice, to take part in the journey and cycle that continually makes room for new life and brings forth resurrection, as we are called and invited to join in Divine creation and divine redemption. And, to choose this journey and this life, often (if not always) means giving up our lives as we have known them or even as we may desire them to be. It means following Jesus on his journey to the cross. Which at first glance without prior knowledge appears to be the end and the final defeat. But as we know, from the cross, comes the resurrection, and from the resurrection comes the hope of life beyond death, joy in the face of pain, victory forged from struggle, and love despite selfishness.

There is a lot of controversy around salmon hatcheries in California, whether it is right or wrong, but in the end it is the only way we have found yet to continue the life cycle of salmon. More so, whether born in a hatchery or the gravel bed of a stream, whether driven by way of a tanker and dumped out like my children's toys into the tub at bath time, or carried out by way of a river's harsh current and the estuaries tide dropped into the sea another fish among many, the salmon all grow the same, and should they survive and thrive they all make their way back the same, to the place where they first came. It seems similar with us, there are so many ways to come to Christ, to find our call to take on the hard work and journey of carrying our cross, and making our way towards the Kingdom, or as I have heard it called and like to say, the Kin-dom. There is no one way to do it, but there is one thing we all have in common, like are beloved salmon, we are all imprinted with the same kin-dom water, that calls us home and invites us to make our journey with Christ. Where we can continue the work of making room and bringing forth resurrection in this world. But we, as Jesus reminds us in our passage for today, can only make this journey in and as much as we are able to put those things aside that clamor for our attention, and distract us from our true work and call. That of creating, spreading, and growing beloved community. Because when we can turn from self centered distractions, and towards loving actions, as Jesus has said before, our yoke becomes easy and our burden light. Our life becomes, as Paul reminds us today, a gift to be shared like the fruits of the Spirit, instead of a burden that impedes. Like our salmon friends the journey can be arduous, a miraculous feat to behold. But, as human beings, the imago dei (image of God) we have the ability to work together to save not only the beautiful creatures of this earth and the land which we have been entrusted with, but also one another, as we lay down our own lives for the greater good. So I pray we will make our journey alongside one another, find deep within ourselves our kingdom water and use it to guide us in the hard and necessary work of bringing about resurrection in this world.