The Transformation of Peter
(Acts 2:36-41, 1 Peter 1:17-23)

I suspect that most of us can think of someone in our own life who reminds us of the apostle Peter. You know, that big, bluntly honest, impulsive guy with eyes that flicker between those of a chastened puppy and an attack dog. He’s the one who shows sulky remorse after being fired for an angry outburst at the office. Have you ever known anyone like that?

Simon Peter was there with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. According to Luke, Jesus was teaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Peter and his men were washing nets. Jesus asked Peter if he could preach to the crowd from his boat. When he was finished with his talk he told Peter to push off and hop in. He told him where to lower the nets for a lot of fish. After initial skepticism (they’d already been out all night with no luck), Peter agreed, and they pulled in so many fish that the nets were breaking. Peter collapsed at Jesus’ feet and said, “Go away from me because I’m a sinful man.”

I’m pretty sure Jesus already knew that. But what was his response? “Don’t be afraid, Peter. From now on, you’ll be fishing for people.” That’s where it all started. And from there the voyage was wild, exhilarating, and more than a little choppy.

Peter’s the one who invited Jesus and the other disciples to his house for dinner even though his mother-in-law was there sick in bed. I mean, think about that for a moment. Would you have done that? “Honey, we have eleven guests for dinner!” All’s well that ends well, and Peter’s wife undoubtedly felt less upset about the whole thing when Jesus healed her mom, but I’m guessing it was touch and go there for a while.

Peter’s also the one who, when he saw Jesus walking on the water, said something like, “Hey, Jesus if that’s you out there, command me to walk out and join you!” And then he does! (At least until he looks down at the water and says, “What in the world am I doing?”)

He’s the one who incurred Jesus’ anger by saying that he’d never allow him to be taken and killed. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus said. And Peter earned Jesus’ sad, prescient response when he said he’d never deny or abandon him, and from Holy Week it’s all too fresh in our memories what happened on the night of the betrayal. Peter denied him three times, and in the process reverted to some of his sailor lingo, if you know what I mean. And of course his denials were fresh on the heels of attacking, with a sword, a slave who was with the arresting party. I trust you get the picture. Peter is a big, bearded, brash, blunt fisherman who turns on an emotional dime.

And in today’s readings, he features prominently, but look at what we’ve got! In fact, that’s exactly what I’d like us to do for a few minutes this morning. Let’s look at Peter’s words and behavior in the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and his first letter. Because not only is there crucial teaching delivered with authority, but there’s evidence of a pretty massive transformation in him which invites a closer look.
Our first reading is from Acts, chapter 2. It’s less than two months after Jesus' Resurrection, and the disciples are gathered together at a building in Jerusalem. Shortly before they’d heard a sound like a great rush of wind, and they saw a very strange sight. Something like tongues of fire alit upon many of them, and they started speaking in other languages.

Naturally a crowd began to gather and they were bewildered because people from many nations were there for the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, celebrating the harvest of winter wheat, and many are hearing messages in their own native languages. I mean, this is weird! And the crowd is growing.

It’s in this context that Peter emerges from the other eleven and begins to address them. He says, “Judeans and everyone, listen up!” He says, “Let it be known to all of Israel that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (How’s that for an ice breaker?)

So, what’s Peter talking about? He’s talking about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not only has God confirmed him as the promised Messiah, but as the Lord. Kyrie. The Master who is worthy of their worship. And Luke tells us in this passage that they’re cut to the heart! In fact this is a breath-stopping, connect-the-dots moment wherein this great and holy man, who, in a grotesque miscarriage of justice, had been tortured, humiliated and executed, (and this had been supported by masses of Judeans). This man has been raised from the dead and his identity has been vindicated for all the world to see. He is the awaited King.

The Judeans are cut to the heart, and are gagging on their own guilt. So they cry out, “What should we do?” And Peter answers, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

Peter the preacher. Who would have guessed? A few weeks earlier he’d gone yellow and denied Jesus three times. In utter shame and complete despair he went out into the night and wept bitterly. It was all over. And on top of that, because of his Galilean accent, there were some folks who were on to him. He was running scared. What could possibly change a man so much in such a short time? A man who refused to speak the truth out of sheer terror, and then a few weeks later he couldn’t restrain himself from speaking the truth with threats still hanging over his head.

From the texts the only explanation that will suffice is a threefold one. First is that he personally witnessed Jesus of Nazareth dead and then resurrected. He was the one who raced John to the tomb on Easter morning when Mary Magdalene reportedly breathlessly that it was empty.
He was there when Jesus appeared in a locked room, seemingly out of nowhere, the evening of that same day. It was then, that, for the first time, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” That’s the second thing: the Holy Spirit. The rest were there, too, except for Thomas. And Peter was there a week later when Thomas assuaged his doubts by touching the healed wounds of the risen Christ.

But I think the key moment for Peter comes later yet. There’s a place on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee where there are round stones interspersed with fine pebbles and sand, in a stretch that lies between groves of shade trees. It’s a great place for a picnic. It was just after daybreak, and Peter and the others had been fishing.

As they’re approaching the shore they see a man on the beach. The man calls out to them to cast the net on the starboard side. They do, and guess what—the fish begin to fill the nets. John shouts out, “It’s the Lord!” The painfully modest and abashed Peter puts some clothes on because he was naked, and leaps into the water while the others pull the fish-laden boat to shore. And there, as you know, Jesus invites them to join him for a breakfast of grilled Galilean tilapia.

Nowadays it’s such a popular spot for pilgrims that there’s a sign whose graphics send the clear message that neither swimming nor barbecuing are allowed on the beach. (Killjoys. I guess too many tourists were getting selfies of grilling where Jesus grilled.) But it’s there on that spot that Jesus asks Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, Do you love me?’ Simon Peter says, ‘Of course I love you!’ and Jesus says, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Jesus asks the same question a second time, and Peter replies, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ and Jesus says, ‘Tend my sheep.’ And again, a third time, Jesus says, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Perhaps feeling a little injured at this point, Peter replies, ‘Lord, you know everything! You know that I love you!’ and Jesus says, ‘Feed my sheep.’

And then, with his big, gentle eyes, eyes that have known the fear and pain of a violent death firsthand, and then welcomed the new daylight of life immortal, he fixes those eyes upon Peter, and says, ‘When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you’ll stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (You may know that Peter later died the death of a martyr by being crucified upside down, since he considered himself unworthy to be crucified in the same way as his Master.) After this poignant prophecy Jesus says to Peter, ‘Follow me.’

Do you see what’s happened here? Jesus has done three things that have ignited Peter’s transformation. First, he convinces him of the Resurrection, and convinces him beyond any doubt that this is a sure sign that Jesus is the long-awaited King who has come to redeem the world.

Next he breathes upon him and the other disciples and imparts to them the Holy Spirit to live within them, and show them truth, and give them God’s love and power, along with an unquenchable passion to share the good news of Jesus to the human race.
And finally he gives Peter a commission to do exactly that. He had the Holy Spirit, but he didn’t yet have his marching orders. Peter had denied him three times, and now Jesus gives him the opportunity to overtly reverse the shame of his actions by asking three times about his commitment. In so doing Jesus shows his complete forgiveness of Peter, and entrusts him with the responsibility to, in the power of the Holy Spirit, care for the sheep of his flock.

There’s a pattern here, and this pattern applies not only to Peter, but to each and every one of us as well. I don’t in any way mean to pop any self-esteem bubbles here, but we Christians can be a pretty rough and motley bunch. (Or am I the only one here who occasionally incurs abrasions when my rough edges get sanded down?) This doesn’t all just disappear when the Lord draws us to himself. Even the veteran apostle and evangelist Peter had to be corrected when he insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised and go kosher. The Lord doesn’t eliminate our personalities and make us boring little clones. We’re still a little goofy.

Yet God wants to use each of us, in our own way, warts and all, and in His own way, as artisans and craftsmen building God’s kingdom. We begin by investing belief in the risen Christ and gaining citizenship in the kingdom through Holy Baptism. We continue as Jesus’ apprentices, being trained by the scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And then the Lord commissions us to become journeymen, following in Jesus’ footsteps, being willing even to experience tremendous hardship in order to claim the prize at the end of the journey, when all is set right and love and life prevail forever.

Indeed, it was near the end of Peter’s earthly journey that he penned the words we heard in today’s epistle reading. He’d become a key leader in the church. He’d stood boldly and preached repentance and grace to the gathered crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost. He’d journeyed far and wide to spread the gospel, and is thought by most to have been the first Bishop of Rome, the office we now know as the Pope.

Peter’s days are numbered as he writes to the faithful in Asia Minor (in what is now western Turkey), in his first letter. In my mind’s eye I can picture his distant gaze through a twilit window as he rests his quill and reviews scenes from his long ministry. And when he returns to his writing, these are his words:

Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, ransomed not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...who was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.

Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love,
love one another deeply from the heart. You’ve been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

For Peter, the tumultuous disciple, the swirling winds of impulse have settled into a confident, intentional and passionate faith. For him it all culminates in love and life within God’s embrace. Peter has become a teacher, teaching Christ’s own heart in the power of the Holy Spirit.

May we so set ourselves to believe and follow, that, like Peter, we also may feed Christ’s sheep with the food of hope, and trust fully in the One who raised Jesus victorious from the dead. Amen.