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Text: John 21: 15-19
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“This Is the Moment We Have Been Waiting For!”

Not long ago I heard a story about a form of theater in Japan that originated in the 17th century. It's called Kabuki Theater, and it's one of several traditional Japanese arts that I would love one day to witness in person. Cast members wear heavily stylized make-up and dress, and they move with elaborate gestures. The stories are often familiar to audiences, depicting epic dramas from Japanese history. And there's a ritual element to each performances. For example, there is within the theater a section of seating where audience members are expected to shout out to the performers, encouraging them with their words or exclamations - not unlike a sporting event, or certain church services. The practice is called *kakegoe*. Sometimes it's done by professionals, and sometimes it's just offered by fans who get caught up in the drama.

At one particular Kabuki performance, an anthropologist was in attendance, and he reported that an audience member stood up immediately behind him, right in the middle of the performance and he exclaimed for everyone in the theater to hear: “This is the moment I have been waiting for!”¹

I wish I could have heard that exclamation. I love the naked exuberance of it, and I love the man's utter lack of inhibition. It makes me recall times and places where I too have felt like that - hearing favorite pieces of music, say, or waiting for a band to play a favorite song when seeing them live. I have felt it when returning to particular scenes in some favorite books or films. I have felt it when seeing old friends or when I have returned to a city I love. If I were a less inhibited person, I too might have shouted like that man in the Kabuki theater, “Yes, this is the moment I have been waiting for!”

But are there not pivotal moments in each of our lives that, if we are paying attention, function in exactly this way? Are there not instances of clarity that serve to direct or to confirm our direction in life, as if to say, this, here, is what we have been waiting for? Maybe you felt it when you first met your spouse - I did. Maybe you felt it when you found your vocation. Maybe you felt it when you made a move, or when you changed jobs. At certain times in each of our lives, something rises within us to say, yes, I may not have known it, but I have been waiting for this. After that it is up to us to respond, and to pursue whatever it is that has captured us in such a forceful way. In religion, we speak of this as a call.

Ted Gioia is a musician and writer I admire. He tells the story of visiting a jazz club as an adolescent. Gioia was raised by a working class family, and he wasn't offered a ton of exposure to music or the arts, but he was curious, and he managed to teach himself a little piano. During visits to the local library, he found some back copies of *Downbeat* magazine, with monthly write-ups on the latest jazz recordings and performances. It intrigued him - what was this world? The internet didn't exist, so he couldn't turn there, and the local record store didn't have much on offer. He then heard an advertisement on a local radio station for a jazz club that welcomed minors, one that was only a few miles away from his home. And so one weekend, he went.

¹ A story told by Ted Gioia. See “The Live Music Event That Changed My Life,” Feb. 16, 2026, on the Substack “The Honest Broker.” <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-live-music-event-that-changed>

The performance that night was from Yusef Lateef, a saxophone player, with Kenny Barron on the piano. The band launched into a piece that had a furious, blistering tempo, unlike anything young Ted had ever heard before. The piece lasted for a full thirty minutes, and Gioia remembers being able to see every gesture, every signal, every look conveyed by the musicians as they moved through the song. As Gioia tells the story, it was an instant in which everything converged, one in which he sensed his very destiny unfolding. And he remembers thinking, in so many words, “This is the moment I have been waiting for!” From that point on, Gioia began spending three hours a day at the piano. Five years later he was able to play in clubs. Ten years later he was able to record his first album. But it began in that single instant of recognition.² That’s how vocations are discovered. That’s how meaningful lives are formed: paying attention to such feelings when they happen, and then being willing to follow wherever the path might lead afterwards.

I share all of that because it pertains to our spiritual lives as well. If we’re paying attention, there are times in which we’re given clarity about the path we are to follow, and perhaps also the path we are to leave behind. There are times in which we are given clarity about who we are called to be, and perhaps also who we are not called to be. I imagine we have each had experiences that have served to direct and confirm us along our spiritual journeys. They come in all shapes and sizes. I once worked with a hospital chaplain who described finding Kundalini Yoga, and who spoke about feeling as though she had come home. I have heard people describe retreats for contemplative prayer or meditation as profoundly life altering, experiences in which they felt something within them arise, as if to say, “This is the moment I have been waiting for.” So too, I have heard friends speak of how it felt to first encounter some of the African diasporic traditions, and how those traditions seemed to reach deep inside, as if to say, “It is you I have been waiting for.”

Closer to home, many of us, I trust, have had experiences within the Christian faith that have served to confirm that this is indeed the path we wish to be on. Yes, there are moments of uncertainty or doubt, but within most of us there has also been something that has moved us to follow along this path, or to stay on it.

That’s certainly been true for me. When I went to Divinity School, I intended to study religion and literature, and to become an academic. I was dead set against ever working in a church. I had been in churches my whole life, and even though I had had good experiences, I imagined it would be a terribly constricting environment to work in. But then in my final year of Divinity School, I attended a meeting with a Presbyterian pastor who was recruiting for a new residency program at a church in Bryn Mawr, outside of Philadelphia. I sat in that office and explained to this pastor all the misgivings I had about working in a church, and he absorbed it all, and then said, in a Southern drawl and with a sly grin, “You sound like just the kind of person we might be looking for.”

I wound up applying, and then being accepted into the program, and I began the work still full of misgivings. Would I have to be someone other than who I was? Would I have to say or do things I did not actually believe? Would I find it intellectually dull? Bryn Mawr was a large church, with a talented and very smart pastoral staff, and I quickly found that all my misgivings were unfounded. I loved the community, and I loved the work I was given to do. I loved (and still love) that I was invited into some very intimate and touching scenes of people’s lives. I loved (and still love) being able to talk about life’s deepest questions. I even came to love this strange task called preaching, learning to treat it with the rigor and passion that it deserves. Looking back now, those two years were a time of clarity in my own life when, like the man in the Kabuki theater, I all but leapt up to say, “This is the moment I have been waiting for!”

² See Gioia’s article, “The Live Music Event That Changed My Life.”

Something like that is being dramatized in the familiar story from John's Gospel about Peter's encounter with the risen Jesus on the shores of Galilee. I've preached on that story often, and you know it well enough - how Jesus takes Peter aside and frees him from the shame of his denials. For every single renunciation that Peter had made during the trial and crucifixion of his friend, Jesus now offers Peter a chance to reaffirm his love. It is an act of restoration, but it is also a scene of confirmation, in which Peter receives his vocation. "Feed my sheep," is the instruction he receives, which is to say, take over this work, care about all of these people, feed and clothe and love and support them.

Without that encouragement, Peter would likely have gone back to his old life. He would have kept on fishing, chalking up the years spent with Jesus to a mid-life experiment that had ended badly. Instead, that encounter becomes the pivotal event that shows Peter what we can think of as his destiny. It is the moment that he had been waiting for his whole life.

But the story has an interesting twist at the end, one that helps us to sense the responsibility that comes with saying yes to this call - perhaps to any call. "When you were younger," Jesus says, "you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." We're told that this saying foretells the kind of death that Peter would later undergo, but it also seems to indicate what happens whenever we respond to the moment for which we have been waiting. For while rising in order to say "This is the moment that I have been waiting for" does suggest a kind of joyful recognition of one's pathway, it also implies a kind of discipline and commitment afterwards that may prove to be profoundly uncomfortable. It may even involve the loss of one's agency, for saying yes to one commitment will necessarily mean saying no to many others. Sometimes, in the life of faith, saying yes to God, saying yes to becoming who we were meant to be - means being led to places we would not otherwise wish to go, except that we remain committed to that original calling.

Congregationalists aren't often fixated upon the words and actions of popes, which, who knows, may be to our detriment. Because one of the places we've seen this dynamic at work - becoming more fully who we were called to be - is in the profound witness and truth telling demonstrated recently by Pope Leo. Just as no spouse or parent knows exactly what they're signing up for when they say yes to those roles, no priest could ever imagine what they will be asked to respond to when becoming the spiritual leader of some 1.5 billion people. Some have performed admirably in the role. Others have floundered. Now one year in, the man formerly known as Robert Prevost is rising to the challenge, meeting the blasphemies and belligerence demonstrated here and elsewhere with a firm resolve. Many of you likely read Pope Leo's words this week, but they are worth hearing once again. With a nod to none other than Bob Dylan, he said: "The masters of war pretend not to know that it takes only a moment to destroy, yet a lifetime is often not enough to rebuild. They turn a blind eye to the fact that billions of dollars are spent on killing and devastation. Woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness and filth." Then, building on Jesus's own teachings about peacemaking, Leo said this: "The world is being ravaged by a handful of tyrants, yet it is held together by a

multitude of supportive brothers and sisters.”³ These are extraordinary words, spoken by a man who has stood up, as if to say, “This is the moment I have been waiting for.”

We need not be an apostle or a pope to respond to that kind of summons. I believe we’re each of us offered flashes of insight along the way, like Peter on the shore with Jesus, like the man in the Japanese theater. We simply need to be cognizant of the Spirit moving in and among us, and to follow where it leads.

With that in mind, you’re all invited to take part in a conversation that will be happening in just a few minutes in Fellowship Hall. It’s part of a larger effort of faith communities in Southeastern Connecticut to discern the work that we are being called to perform in our region, and then to respond collectively. You’ll be asked to sit with a small group of other folks from FCCOL, and to share some of the things that most concern you. We’ll be compiling the results of these conversations, and then sharing them with our wider network. Then, all the churches participating in this process will pick one or two actionable items that we can all work on together to improve human lives in our part of the world. Susan Switzer has organized our efforts, and I’m deeply grateful. But I’m also grateful for Rick Strickhart, Kathy Sugland, Mariette Brown, John Higgins, and Bill Colihan, who have done an enormous amount of work on our core team preparing for this event. And so I hope you’ll stay to be a part of it. It’s one way that people of faith and conscience can rise collectively in order to say, “this is the moment we have been waiting for!”

I’ll close with a brief story. This past week I drove my daughter Elsa around to visit a few colleges, and on Thursday we wound up in Amherst, to visit the UMass campus. Afterwards, we drove downtown to get a bite to eat, and we wound up just around the corner from Emily Dickinson’s house. And I thought of lines that Emily herself had written to a friend when she was entering Mount Holyoke College as a freshman in 1850. She wrote, “The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea.” Hers was a quiet and secluded life, and yet whenever she took up her pen, Emily Dickinson rose, as if in a crowded theater, in order to say “This is the moment I have been waiting for!” She followed her call. She buffeted the sea. And so may we.

³ From *The New York Times*, April 16, 2026: “‘Woe to Those Who Manipulate Religion,’ Pope Says Amid Standoff With Trump,” by Mokoto Rich.