

Series: Upstream

May 15, 2016

Title: The Great Reversal

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Text: Acts 2:1-21

A Salmon's Journey

A Salmon's Journey:

The sockeye salmon's life journey began 900 miles from the sea high in the Rocky Mountains. It lived off food stored in its yoke for several months, fed on tiny plankton all summer, and then spent the next several years as a juvenile fish known as a *parr*.

Eventually it found its way to the brackish waters where the river met the sea. It was there that it adjusted to salt water and grew silver scales so that it could venture out into the wide ocean.

And then, eight years after it left that mountain stream where it hatched, it was time to return. You might call it the Great Reversal.

- After finding the river where it was born, it leaves the ocean behind and returns to fresh water.
- It turns dark red and grows a characteristic hump.
- Every ounce of strength and every calorie of stored energy will now go into the upstream journey to the place where the salmon was born.

Upstream!

It is for this reason that salmon are referred to as *anadromous*, meaning, "running upward." Every inch of that last part of their life journey is a battle against the river. And it for this journey that the salmon has lived every moment of the past eight years. It was literally "born" for this upstream journey.

At the beginning of this journey it is in peak condition, the result of those years of swimming and feeding in the open ocean. Now it will have to call on every bit of that power and stamina, as well as all of its stored reserves. It will have to summon up each of its mysterious navigational abilities. It will battle the river's current every inch of the way. It will find its way through

swamps, it will leap over rapids and waterfalls, it will be stressed by pollution. It will have to escape the clutches of bears, eagles and other predators. Its journey is one of the most extreme migrations on the planet.

Then, when it has found the little stream where it hatched eight years ago, it will fulfill its greatest purpose: to spawn and thus create the next generation of sockeye salmon. The salmon will have eaten its last meal just before it leaves salt water. Its reserves must last not only the several months of swimming and leaping upstream, but also must nurture the developing eggs. The female lays her eggs in a nest or *redd*, where they are fertilized by a male salmon. She guards the eggs until her reserves run out and she dies.

The Salmon and the River:

You might say that the river is the salmon's best friend when the salmon is making its journey to the sea. The river's current pushes the tiny fish ever downstream until its waters mix with the vast ocean.

But you can't say that the river becomes the salmon's worst enemy on the return journey. After all, the salmon still needs the river! Take it out of the water and it will quickly die. What's more, the river is its road back to the place where it was born. There is *no other way* for the salmon to get where it needs to go. And it will be the waters of that same river that become the nursery for its offspring.

The salmon needs the river and is totally at home in the river, but *it does not let the river determine its course*. Whatever obstacles the river throws at it, the salmon finds a way to move on *upstream*. And in so doing, it fulfills the purpose for which it was born.

A New Exodus

Kingdom now?

In the days and weeks after Jesus rose from the dead the disciples must have felt like they were on top of the world. Luke tells us that Jesus met with them repeatedly over a 40 period. During that time He promised them that they would experience the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit.

In response, Luke tells us:

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Acts 1:6 NIV

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

There it was: The Big Question. Was this to be the time that God stepped into human history to finally make things right? Was this the time that the world would finally learn to do things God's way? And was this time when Israel would rule the world on God's behalf?

Jesus answers their question, but not in the way that they could ever have expected.

Not when, but how:

He never answers the question of "now?" Instead, He redirects them to the question of "how."

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Acts 1:7-8 NIV

*He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But **you will receive power** when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Jesus commits them to a God-shaped journey – one that will take them not *to Jerusalem*, but *from Jerusalem to the "ends of the earth."* And with those words, Jesus ascended to Heaven.

They were "on their own."

A New Exodus:

It's hard for us to begin to imagine just how *improbable and incomprehensible* such a journey would have been for them. Jerusalem was – for them and their people – the center of the world. Hadn't the ancient prophecies promised that the whole world would come *to Jerusalem*? Hadn't Jesus died and risen in Jerusalem? Wasn't Jerusalem the "city of the Great King?"

So what kind of a journey would take them *away* from Jerusalem? To be sent away from Jerusalem was to go into exile – God's punishment for

disobedience. Now Jesus was in effect going to *send them into exile* as a mark of *obedience to Him!* And He wasn't even going to be physically with them anymore!

But there was another way of seeing this journey. This was a God-shaped journey, one that was empowered by His Spirit. It was a New Exodus in which God's People would go out to inherit not a tract of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, but "the ends of the earth." They would be witnesses of Jesus' victory over death and His gift of forgiveness.

Their journey would be nothing less than a Great Reversal.

The Great Reversal

Pentecost Sunday:

The New Exodus moment arrived just ten days later on the Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. This festival celebrated the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai just weeks after the crossing of the Red Sea. It was here that a ragtag mob of refugees became a nation with God as their King.

Now, as the disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem, Sinai happened all over again!

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Acts 2:2-4 NIV

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

The gift that Jesus had promised had come true: they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Just as God had given His Law to Israel at Sinai, now He had placed His Spirit within Jesus' followers, transforming them into a New Israel.

They were ready to set out on their God-shaped journey.

Upstream:

Everything about this God-shaped journey would be “upside down.” It would be the reverse of what they, and their world, had ever seen. It would be nothing less than the Great Reversal. Like salmon who sense the call to leave the open ocean, find their home river, and make the long swim upstream, Jesus’ disciples suddenly *knew* what their journey was to be: it was to be a God-shaped journey against the flow of everything they – and those around them – ever knew!

- For starters, when they burst forth from the room where they had received the Holy Spirit, they began to *witness* to Jesus in a host of other languages – the languages of the many people who had come to Jerusalem for the festival. For a moment, at least, the curse of the Tower of Babel was reversed. God was beginning to bring humanity back together as the leading part of His New Creation.
- Second, God had reversed the decision of the Jerusalem leaders to have Jesus put to death as a traitor.

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Acts 2:23-24 NIV

"This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

"But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

- Third, God Himself had made this rejected messiah King of His New Creation:

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Acts 2:36 NIV

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

This journey – one that would take them *away* from home and country and out into the big, wide world – was the journey that they had been created for. It was the journey that would accomplish what they had asked Jesus

about. It was – and is – the journey that brings about God’s Kingdom in the hearts and lives of people like you and me.

Turn around!

There is only one way to join in this God-shaped journey. You have to embrace The Great Reversal. You have to **Turn Around**. You have to commit yourself to swimming against the current.

When the people asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37 NIV), he answered:

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Acts 2:38-39 NIV

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

- **Repent:** Turn around, change direction, swim upstream to become part of God’s New Creation and discover His love and forgiveness.
- **Receive:** Accept the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in your life as His Presence living in you. Let Him lead you, guide you, direct you on this God-shaped journey.
- **Become the People of God:** Peter described nothing less than a radically new identity: God’s People would now include “all who are far off” – people from the entire human family who would one day answer God’s call to become one with Him.

The Great Reversal:

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The sleek silver salmon that turns its head toward fresh water answers a mysterious built-in call to fulfill its purpose for living. It leaves behind the food and freedom of the sea to swim once more in fresh water. It battles the current, leaps the rapids, navigates the river’s twists and turns, evades predators, so that it can give life by producing the next generation.

We are called to no less a demanding, and no less a fulfilling journey! We are called to leave our "Jerusalem," and take a God-shaped journey into this world. Our river is our culture. We live in it, just as a salmon lives in the water. Our culture provides our path, just as the river provides a path for the salmon to reach the place where it was born.

But our culture *does not* determine our direction, just as the river does not determine the direction of the salmon's journey. We are on a journey that can only happen because God is living in us. Everything we encounter in our culture must be measured against the God-shaped journey. We are part of God's Great Reversal.