

John 6:1-21
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With us Always

Our gospel reading from John today presents two amazing stories – the feeding of the 5,000 on a mountain, and Jesus walking on water to get to the disciples. These two miracle stories, when taken together, function for us as they did for John's community – to show us who Jesus is and what he has come to do. They show us that Jesus comes to us in our need, before we have even named it. Comes to us, in the dark, in the storm, over the sea.

Jesus crosses to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, yet crowds follow and gather on the mountain. They follow because they have seen the signs that he is doing for the sick. Jesus and his disciples walk up the mountain and sit down. The significance of a mountain setting would not be lost on John's community. The mountain was a place where God was and humans went to encounter God. There are similarities to Moses' time on Sinai after which God provides manna for the people of Israel and makes them a community.

Jesus asked Philip – one disciple originally from that area – Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? Well, Philip might know the area, what resources there are, but he quickly sizes up the situation to be impossible – 6 months wages wouldn't be enough to get us food for all of these people.

The absurdity of the situation is enhanced when Andrew says one boy does have 5 barley loaves and 2 fish and points out they're not going to make a dent in the crowd's need for food. And, the food – barley loaves were poor persons food and the fish, well the Greek words tell us this fish would not have been fresh. It would have been dried/preserved fish that was meant to be eaten with bread.

But, Jesus orders the disciples to organize the crowd into groups on the grass. Grass? On the side of a mountain? In a mostly dry environment? Is this a foretaste of the unexpected abundance of God that provides in Jesus? Next comes John's version of the Eucharistic meal. Remember, there is no Last Supper in John – instead, we have here, Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; also the fish, as much as they wanted.

And after they had eaten, Jesus orders the left-overs, the fragments to be gathered up. Nothing is lost, forgotten when Jesus is around. 12 baskets are filled and the people see this as a sign that Jesus must be their prophet. They want to make him king.

Jesus knows he is more than a prophet, knows that the people don't understand who he really is. They have eaten their fill today, and they want to hold on to this source of abundance and fulfillment in their lives, making it, making Jesus into something of their world and within their control. Jesus knows they don't understand that what he has to offer is freely available but can't be controlled by us. In the next days, many will feel unfilled and stop following Jesus. Jesus has not come to be installed as their king by force so he goes away alone. Neither what Jesus has to offer us, nor Jesus himself can be controlled by us.

The disciples decide to set sail for Capernaum. One translation says: darkness had already come to be – words meant to remind us of both the darkness and chaos present when God created the heavens and the earth. And to remind us of the chaos of the darkness brought into the world by sin and evil. The seas had awakened and it was rough.

And what does Jesus do? He walks on the water. He walks through darkness and on the back of chaos and he claims – “I am”. In Jesus we see again the power and authority of God who stilled the waters of chaos at the beginning of creation and who with Moses separated the Red Sea.

Sometimes we seem one among thousands, with a need similar to the person next to us. Sometimes our pain seems so great that we bend under the weight of it. Sometimes we seem insignificant to the creator of the universe. Sometimes we feel our lives are leftovers ready to be thrown out. Sometimes the darkness of evil casts a haze over the entire world. Sometimes the chaos of mixed-up emotions, judgment, discrimination and fear toss us about on rough waters.

These miracles tell us that nothing is too great for God to overcome. No matter how big our problems seem, Jesus is with us always. No matter how much chaos is in our life, God stills the raging waters. These miracles tell us our needs are not too great for God. These miracles tell us that even the fragments, the leftovers are important to God, and we will be gathered up.

That God gives us what we need before we even ask for it, opens wide his hand to satisfy the needs of every living creature.' {from the psalm]

Jesus reveals God in relationship with the world. Reveals God meeting the needs of those who hunger for meaning and significance, those who hunger physically and spiritually. Jesus reveals God present no matter how close or how far our boat is from the shore; no matter how high the waves or how futile our rowing. God comes to us, in darkness, out of seeming absence and meets our needs.

These stories ready us for mission; ready us to be sent out. Sent out into the darkness, the chaos; sent to meet the overwhelming neediness of a world tossed and threatened by evil. Sent out realizing that the Lord always has work for us, always calls us to new ministries, new openness. Sent out realizing that when we survey the landscape, we're not always on the mountain and the Lord himself seems absent. Sent out realizing that some of our tasks will have us rowing against a strong headwind.

These stories prepare us to receive our Lord in the bread and wine we will share together. In this bread and wine, is the same presence, the same love, power and majesty that the crowd on the mountain and the disciples in the boat saw and experienced. This is the gift that sustains us – the very gift of Christ himself, the gift that never abandons us, falls short of our needs; the gift that is never lost, never drowned, never conquered. Thanks be to God. Amen.