

We're reading John's gospel this morning, but somehow, somehow, today's text helps me understand Matthew's gospel with a new sense of clarity. Matthew's author reminds us that Jesus hasn't come to abolish the law or the prophets – that is to abandon the covenant story of the First Testament – but instead, Jesus has come to fulfil the law and prophets (Matthew 5:17).

John's author sets today's story in the season of Passover, and the Exodus events flood our senses: flaky manna in the wilderness; the thundering, terrifying power of God revealed on Mt. Sinai; a people traversing wilderness country, but also navigating the wilderness of adolescence; tyrannical rulers seeking to flex their muscles, but always showing their futility in relation to a God with transcendent powers and presence.

I know, I know, you just thought this was a story about multiplying fish and loaves, and a ghostly figure walking on water. But a new exodus is in there, if only we will allow it to be seen.

No, it's not a wilderness just across the Red Sea, but it's a strange place. The other side of the Lake, they called it Tiberias (named after the emperor), isn't like the Judah of by-gone days. This place is Hellenistic, a jewel of modern civility, and commerce, and power. But God's not sending spies to reclaim and retake this space with force. A humble prophet arrives to a large crowd. He doesn't wonder how he might subdue them, or

convince them, or drive them out of green pastures. He wonders how he might offer them his love; he wonders if they've been fed. Now I could be mistaken, but aside from county fair barbeques, I don't remember too many politicians asking their handlers if adoring crowds had been fed while they waited for a speech. And I have yet to see a politician flee an enthusiastic gathering, because they were weary of the crowd giving them too much power.

There's no flaky manna or quail this time either. But I think the sequel is more inventive. Barley loaves and a few sardines. A humble boy, willing to offer kindness for the betterment of his neighbors. A faithful boy, willing to trust that a presence greater than his can do extraordinary things with ordinary acts of generosity. And leftovers, twelve baskets full, that won't rot or spoil. There's abundance this time around, and it feels a whole lot more collaborative. A powerful, generous, loving God, eager to multiply the love of faithful people.

Way back when, on Mt. Sinai, the people had to cover their ears, and close their eyes, because the presence of God would go all *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on you if you weren't careful. Moses experienced God in a burning bush, and later as smoke, and fire, and an earthquake. Not really a cozy, gentle, cuddly theophany, is it?

I am sure the disciples were justified in their terror when they saw a human being of their own flesh walking across the sea.

And yet, this strange, miraculous being, reveals himself as human, too: "It is I," Jesus says. And the startled men pull him into the boat. Their eyes don't explode, their skin doesn't melt, they don't shrivel into dusty bones. No! They are instantly delivered to the shoreline.

Do you see it? Do you feel it? Do you sense it? God is doing a new thing. The story, that's the law, and the prophets, and the tradition – it's not being abandoned, it's just being fulfilled, made better, even. Some of those rigid, harsh images of the warrior God, the unapproachable, ineffable God are disappearing. The same God who tamed the chaos monsters at the beginning of time is revealed in a human being we can reach out and touch. The God who seemed SO focused on an inner-circle, or at least was conjured up by people who wanted the divine to be closed off, is giving way to a collaboration. Covenant is being fulfilled in this place where human gifts are recognized and valued, where the divine desires to multiply such gifts, and where the entire cooperative faiths the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In the presence of this Word-made-flesh, one act of generosity can satisfy the appetites of thousands, and even leave rooms for leftovers. In the presence of this Word-made-flesh, disciples can seek Jesus, reel him in, even, and in their mutual transparency and dependence, reach their desired shoreline. And as always, the humility, the fidelity, the creativity of our

God stands in stark contrast to the bravado, the infidelity, and the predictability of Pharaoh and Caesar.

I don't think the author of John is asking you to reckon with the mechanics of multiplying bread, or the physics of defying gravity. Though to be certain, I also don't think it's a bad thing for us to occasionally, believe there's a little bit of magic dust being sprinkled about. I think John's author is commenting, in some small way, on the magnificent mystery and tension that eludes our complete understanding as people of faith.

We know, in some small way, the intimacy and familiarity of God revealed in the stories of Jesus. Here is one who weeps with us, laughs with us, even eats with us, and feeds us. And yet this person channels and marshals inexplicable and incomprehensible abilities and powers. These powers are SO mysterious and SO beyond our comprehension that we chase our tails, even two thousand years later, seeking to scientifically prove or disprove their merits.

But I ask you...we've served Communion here hundreds of times. Have we ever run out? And how is that a tiny square of bread and flat Welch's grape juice, received shoulder-to-shoulder with friends new and old, provokes such a sense of wonder and fulfillment? Why is it that I don't need a whole loaf of bread to tell me I belong, or to tell me I am enough, or to know the abundance and generosity of our Creator?

And I ask you...how many frightening objects have appeared on rough waters heading toward our little boat: a pandemic and all of its side-effects; three decades worth of relationship-trauma – the usual joys and sorrows, up and downs, of a community figuring things out and walking together; world-shifting events: 9-11, elections in the age of social media, stock market spikes, Me-too and BLM movements, the list goes on. Has not our clarity increased, has not our resolve increased, has not our love increased, in those moments when we've turned to our mysterious God, and asked God's presence to come aboard?

Billionaires are rocketing into space; some even have more important appointments so they swallow \$20MM. Tyrants across the globe continue to hoard resources, be it land, be it voting rights, be it access, all in an effort to sustain an exhausting status quo. Olympic games are forging ahead because economic consequences are considered more dire than those to human welfare. The world keeps insisting there's not enough to go around.

But John's author, John's author tells us about a God who transforms small gifts into extraordinary ones. And John's author tells us about a God, who doesn't zap us, or melt us, or leave us, one who even gets in the boat with us.

And I have hope. Hope that a covenant is being fulfilled. Hope that sharing from a table, Christ's table, can transform our world. Hope that a new exodus is in motion.

The Joy of Enough
Bob Stillerman
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 12, 7/25/2021
John 6:1-21



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

So...friends...let's share our bread, and our tuna-fish, and our tofu, too! And let's be intentional about pulling God into discussions about what we hope for, and where we want to go. We may just discover the joy of enough-ness. May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.