

John 6:1-21

The Hillside

We had been to Bethlehem, where Luke tells us Jesus was born, and seen not the lowly stable of our Christmas pageants, but a tall and dark church, with a little room in the lower level, into which we bent over to enter and see the glass star in the floor.

We had been to Calvary, where an elaborate sepulcher is housed inside an even more elaborate church, and candles burned everywhere, and people from all over the world crowded around.

We had been, our little group from Rochester in 1979, to the place in Bethany where it's said Jesus taught the disciples to pray. It was a lovely little chapel, and people from all over the world came through it to pray the prayer Jesus taught us, in their own languages. We exited by walking along a long portico where the prayer was on the walls in more languages and scripts than I could count.

And we had visited the ruins of a first-century synagogue, in Capernaum, perhaps one where Jesus had indeed preached or worshipped. But it took some imagination, surrounded by the excavated fragments of walls, to see it as an intact building.

And then we came to the grassy hillside above Lake Tiberias—the Sea of Galilee—and looked out over the meadow and over the water. There is a church at the top of the hill, but a much simpler one than the ones in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and in the floor is the famous mosaic of the loaves and fishes. For the first time in our visit, I thought, this really looks like the place where it could have happened. I can imagine the 5,000 here, and Jesus and the disciples. Almost all the other sites that purport to be where something took place, are questionable, or at least much paved-over. But this. This really could be the place, and it looked like my imagination of it.

All four gospels tell this miraculous feeding story, some of them twice with different numbers of people! And as you know, each Gospel has a different sensibility, a different audience, a different perspective. Here in the gospel of John, written down much later than the other three, Jesus, as our college chaplain used to say, could see around corners. And where in the other gospels Jesus pretty much wants to stay out of the way of the authorities, (and with good reason, for the Romans were quick and merciless in cutting down Messiah pretenders), here in John he speaks often of being glorified. Everything leads to the cross, the moment of glory.

So, let us enter John's story, this two-day event of food and water.

Jesus is teaching and preaching, and 5,000 people have come out all afternoon to hear him. (This would make the hillside the fourth largest city in Galilee!) All of a sudden it is evening, and it becomes clear that it's supper-time. Philip, says Jesus, how will we feed them all? (to test him, as he already knew what he would do!)

Philip the engineer has his statistics ready—with mathematical accuracy, he replies that a year's wages would not feed so many. It's the immediate scarcity response—we don't have enough.

Andrew, sounding a bit dubious, says, there is a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish—but what is that for so many? Andrew sees a resource, but he too recognizes its scarcity.

So then the miracle happens—in John, the sign is performed. Jesus takes the bread. Barley, the grain of the working class; from a child, almost invisible in society, certainly not important. He breaks, blesses, gives, and there is not just enough, there are twelve baskets left over.

Jeepers, when God gave the people manna in the wilderness, they were strictly counseled about leftovers. Take sufficient, but not too much!

But here, scarcity has overflowed into abundance. How did Jesus DO that?

I know you have all heard that perhaps what Jesus intended was that everyone would uncover the lunches they had secretly brought, and share them around, so there was enough. Well, perhaps that happened too. But in John there is always a bigger reality. Those who had been fed with bread, and with the Word of God from Jesus' lips, were meant to understand that Jesus is the provider, and Jesus the resource. The Word of God Incarnate, God-with-us, Emmanuel!, is God's abundant presence. The One who is and who is to come, is the Bread of Life. He will say so in a couple of chapters from now! It's not just that Jesus is able to perform miracles, though that too is what the gospel wants us to understand. This was the grace of God, making all things new, making life abundant, that multiplied those homely loaves and a few sardines into supper for 5,000.

Somehow I've never worried about how Jesus' miracles worked. God is God, God can do miracles if she wants, move across the water to the scared fishermen in a storm, make that basket of bread keep filling and re-filling. By the measurements of the world, such things cannot happen!

But Jesus invites us again and again not to measure only with the world's limitations. At the point of hunger, and potential conflict, risk and unpredictability—what will this crowd do, now that they are getting restless?—Jesus intervened in a mystifying way. Jesus, says commentator Joseph Webb, subtly, quietly presided over the enactment of a stunning human drama. So the crowd took with them not only the preaching of the day, but the public drama that they had seen and participated in. How else can the news of an itinerant preacher, spread fast in a pre-technological society?

At the point of need, and potential conflict, and risk—disciples alone in a boat at night in a storm—Jesus calmly and quietly appears to them across the water, and announces that “It is I”—the same in Greek as, “I am,” which we will hear many times more about Jesus. I am the bread of life, the water of life, the light of the world, the way, the truth and the life. The miracle is not so much that Jesus can multiply a bunch of barley tortillas, but that he is the Bread of Life. Not so much that he can glide across an angry sea, but that he is the Logos, the Word, the creating and redeeming power of God.

And how does one get that across, pre-TV preachers and Facebook?

Jesus did it by preaching and healing, to be sure, all over the territory, but also by creating public dramas like this one, so everyone would get the point. This is not a bad thing! It caused his message to be remembered, and his life and death to be a saving power for us.

Israel today looks much different from when I visited in 1979. Bethlehem is surrounded by walls; Palestinians must wait in long lines at checkpoints just to come into Jerusalem to work at their jobs. The hillsides where Palestinian families grew their olives and grapes have been bulldozed for illegal (yes, I will say illegal) Jewish settlements. The Holy Land, holy to Muslims, Christians and Jews, groans under a burden of violence and discrimination.

Can we look at the scarcity of compassion there and imagine how the abundance of God's grace might be conveyed? Can we look at any of the hurting, conflicted, risky and unpredictable places that break our hearts—like a prayer meeting at another Emanuel church, this one in South Carolina—and imagine what public drama Jesus is inviting us to enact?