

You may have noticed that we've made a shift from St. Mark's Gospel, which we've been hearing for the past seven weeks, to St. John's Gospel, which we will hear for the next three weeks. There is an essential shift in the storytelling perspective of these two Gospels.

Mark has been emphasizing the human nature of Jesus and waiting until after the crucifixion to reveal his divine nature. John's Gospel emphasizes the Divine nature of Christ and does so from the very first chapter. Consequently, Mark's Gospel talks about the many miraculous "deeds of power" that Jesus performed. John doesn't call these events miracles at all. Perhaps you noticed the word that he uses instead at both the beginning and the end of the story of the feeding of the 5,000. People are coming to Jesus because they saw the "signs" that Jesus was doing; signs pointing to something truly incredible.

For centuries, people accepted the miracles of Jesus as factual. Many people still maintain that Jesus in this Gospel literally turned a few loaves of bread into hundreds of loaves. For other people, the stories about the miracles Jesus performed can be problematic, perhaps especially for highly educated people. I happen to know quite a few engineers and scientists and other folks with post-graduate degrees, some of them in this parish, who have been trained to be suspicious of claims about highly improbable events.

The miracle stories can be encouraging and healing for many Christians, but for others and for many people outside the church, these same stories can actually reinforce doubt. The Episcopal Church doesn't insist that you believe one way or the other. As for me, I hold them as evidence of the Divine nature and authority of Jesus Christ, but I don't need for them to be literal. So I am drawn to the way that John's Gospel tells these stories.

The first 12 chapters of this Gospel are called the "book of signs" not the book of miracles because the author of John's Gospel refers to didn't want us to be distracted by implausible activities or stunned by supernatural outcomes. Extraordinary phenomenon can capture our attention, but if we allow ourselves to be entranced by the acts themselves, deeper miracles can become obscured.

We can be well-served by considerations that strip away a little of the magical thinking but only as long as they maintain the mystery. Let me give you an example. In the feeding of the 5,000, there is a small boy carrying barley loaves who gets a great deal of attention. The boy's presence implies that his mother may be somewhere in the crowd. And what mother would not have brought supplies for her children as they were out and about?

This extraordinary feeding shows up in all four Gospels, but the boy appears only in John's version of this story. John's version is also the only one in which Jesus feeds the crowd by himself. A crowd of 5,000 would have been larger than all but a handful of the largest cities of the day, and so for Jesus to hand each person a bit of bread of fish could have taken many days. But what if the mother of one small boy donated what she had brought for her family and Jesus started to hand it to others? Imagine the amazing experience of an enormous crowd so moved, so inspired, by one simple act of generosity that baskets started opening all through the crowd until everything that people brought was offered freely and shared.

There is more than a simple social or psychological spectacle arising. Is it not a glimpse of the extraordinary? Not from *beyond* the ordinary but an uncommon outcome released from within the commonplace. Not unlike the way that Jesus himself, the bread of life, is present in the bread that we bless, break and share.

Today's feeding story, the fourth sign in the Gospel of John, is the central sign of seven signs and the focus of remainder of the sixth chapter. In the readings to come, we will hear Jesus interpreting and explaining this sign. We need to hold our own explanations gently so that we don't choke new inspiration from emerging. I think that John chose to tell a story about another sign immediately after the feeding to that we might redirect our attention.

The second sign reminds us that we can explain, but not explain *away*, the mystery of Jesus. John's Jesus never acts simply to amaze or astonish, but always to reveal something of who he is and, in turn, something about who God is. In the first story, Jesus responds to a crowd—and to us—to offer himself as the abundant Word of God made flesh or can we say, "made bread"? In any case, Jesus fed and revealed his divine nature to the crowd. In

the second story, Jesus reveals his true nature to his disciples *and to us* by responding as simple, but powerful presence.

John's preference for mystical symbolism is important in this second story. The focus is on Jesus who has once again withdrawn to the mountain, but this time he has gone by himself, a detail that would have triggered some anxiety in first century Mediterranean listeners. A person who went alone into the wilderness was an anomaly, perhaps even dangerous. Jesus moving easily through the natural world well beyond all human control would have been persuasive evidence of his divine power.

If that weren't provocative enough, now the disciples go down to the sea and start across. They are three or four miles out. The night is dark. The sea begins to churn. These storytelling details evoke the chaos before God's creation of the world. The wind began to blow in much the same way as it blew nearly tearing Mt. Sinai apart when God spoke to the great prophet Elijah with the sound of sheer silence.

But none of that frightened the disciples. They only became terrified when they saw Jesus walking toward them on the sea.

Where the crowd got a glimpse of the divine nature of Jesus Christ, the disciples got a more concentrated exposure. And, as the letter to the Hebrews says, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." John's Jewish listeners would also likely have recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Let those that walk in darkness and have no light trust in the name of the Yahweh and rely on their God."

The turning point comes when Jesus speaks the very words that God spoke to Moses: the Greek is "*egō eimi*," meaning "I am" or "I exist" or "I am that I am." We heard it translated as a more straightforward "It is I," and Jesus will use the same phrase four more times before the end of this chapter. More than simply announcing that he has arrived, as if to say "It's just me" or "Honey, I'm home," John's Jesus is claiming his Divine nature. More than a prophet like Elijah or Isaiah or even Moses who all heard and conveyed the word of God, Jesus, for John, *is himself* the burning bush of the new covenant. The same voice that spoke to Moses, now speaks in person: "I am that I am."

Hearing these words, the disciples want to take Jesus into the boat. I like the implication in the Greek word that allows us to translate this as "Then

they *willingly received* him into the boat...” John’s Gospel often uses the same verb “to receive” in reference to trusting, receiving, Jesus as the Son of God. The trusting reception of Christ leads to calm and to joy, or in the case of the disciples, “*immediately* the boat reached the land toward which they were going.”

These two stories belong together. The story of the feeding of the 5,000 can awaken our expectations for each other, such that we *ourselves* overflow with love and loaves, even when our personal resources appear to us to be meager or beyond our means. We may have limited incomes or physical constraints or other frailties and quirks. But by receiving—trusting—the Risen Christ, the few can become many, the weak can become strong and those hungry for the love of God can be filled.

The story of Jesus on the water can relax our need to explain everything and, instead, simply to fall to our knees in awe when we encounter the great “I am.” And sometimes highly improbable and marvelous events do happen. I’ve seen moments in hospitals, in families and in churches that defy my ability to make logical sense of them.

Each of these stories fills out the other. Together, they remind us to marvel *and* to act; to be filled with awe at the simple fact of our existence *and* to live in gratitude, loving others as Christ loves us. Come to this table then, not in fear, but to receive the Risen Christ. Savor the extraordinary revealed within the ordinary. “Earth’s crammed with heaven,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “and every common bush afire with God¹.” God is always, already present, and in our willing reception, we experience and spread the never-ending, never-failing, and always-faithful love of God—the land toward which we are going.

¹Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from “Aurora Leigh” found in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, Nicholson & Lee, eds. 1917.