

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

What is the largest object that you have ever seen? Some of you have seen the enormous Boeing factory up in Everett, and that *is* one of the biggest buildings on the planet, but I know that you've seen something bigger. Maybe you have seen something huge in nature like the Grand Canyon or Mount Everest. I know that you've seen something substantially larger.

I know that because the largest object that anyone has ever seen is the *same* largest object that everyone has seen. Even people who don't have sight have felt its effects.

It's the sun. The star at the center of our solar system is so massive nearly a million Earth-sized planets could fit inside it. We see and feel its effects every day. All life depends on it and is intimately

connected to it. And we can become so fascinated by the results of the sun's activity that we lose sight of the source.

Just so, we can miss the universally larger reality that this Gospel reading points to if we let ourselves become preoccupied with *how* the 5,000 were fed or *how* Jesus walked on water. We can miss *why* these things happened.

John's Gospel never describes Jesus' activities as "miracles." These events may or may not have scientific or rational explanations, and that distinction is not trivial. It *is* beside the point.

John's Gospel calls these actions *signs* because they disclose the larger reality and the true source of these astonishing events. And by "sign," the gospeler does not mean signs that have arbitrary meaning assigned to them. Those are signals, like stop signs or traffic lights. Signals have no meaning beyond what we agree to give them; no meaning that is essential to their nature.

For example, the first stop signs were a variety of colors and shapes until the late '20s, when we changed them all to yellow. Red octagons only showed up in 1954. In Japan, some traffic lights aren't green, but blue and yet both indicate that drivers should stop.

What John's Gospel refers to are signs that participate in what they point to *by their nature*. They are "symbols." Smoke is a symbolic sign of fire. Smoke is part of a fire, and at the same time, is also something a little different than fire. Lightning is a symbolic sign of thunderstorms; distinct from the storm, but not "other than" the storm. A clearly recognizable aroma is the symbolic sign of freshly baked bread; it is an unmistakable element of bread that is one with the entire experience of bread.

And for Christians, Jesus is the bearer and revealer of God – the symbolic sign of God; distinct in full humanness and one in full divinity.

And so, this Gospel reading places Jesus on a mountaintop, a clue that the context of the story is a wild place where dangers lurk and also a thin, holy place where people may encounter God. It is Passover, but this enormous crowd of people who have seen the signs Jesus was performing for the sick are not headed to the Temple. Instead, they have followed this wandering rabbi across the sea and up the mountain.

Raising his eyes, Jesus asks Philip asks a question about where they might buy loaves of bread. He is testing Philip because Jesus knows what is coming up.

This is the second time that John's Gospel has placed Jesus at an annual Passover celebration. At the first, he drove the sheep and oxen out of the Temple, prompting people to ask him what signs he might show them to justify his actions.

"Destroy this sanctuary," he answered, talking about his own body, "and in three days I will raise it."

Philip did not comprehend that first Passover as a foreshadowing of what God would reveal at the third Passover; the sequence of events that we call Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If he had, Philip would not have answered a question about *where* the bread of life comes from with an answer about *how much* actual bread might cost.

Now, we have to give Philip a break. This Gospel reading is full of understandable misunderstandings. Jesus wasn't challenging Philip with a pass-fail test or an essay test of his knowledge. Jesus was testing Philip more like a baker tests a cake to see whether it needs more time in the oven.

Jesus didn't roll his eyes or correct Philip or even ask the question again. Instead, he took an opportunity that Andrew brought to him. Taking the loaves of barley bread and the fish from a boy, Jesus gave thanks for them and distributed them. These are virtually the same actions that Jesus will perform at the last supper on the night before the next Passover. These actions are symbolic signs; they point to the unifying love of God and also participate as a part of that loving communion.

The story doesn't say there were *only* these few loaves and fish. And yet, it is not superficial to be in awe of a large number of people who were fed a banquet from what appear to be only a few resources. Either way, there is a larger truth here.

John's version of this story causes us to reconsider where to look for the bread of life and the true cost of that precious bread. The people, *seeing the sign* that Jesus has just performed, started saying, "This is surely the prophet who is coming into the kosmos." They assigned a meaning to the event that made sense to them, as we

often do. They were not morons and they didn't fail. They were just faithful people who were now seeing Jesus as a powerful prophet would deliver them from Rome and restore Israel to her former glory like Moses and Jeremiah had delivered the Israelites from Egypt.

The people have quite naturally misunderstood the implications of the sign they have seen. Instead of opening themselves to the astonishing new expression of God's life-affirming love in Jesus, they want to seize Jesus and make him their earthly king – exactly the false charge that Pontius will use to execute Jesus.

Like Philip's response, this, too, is a totally human interpretation of God.

And even the most breathtaking human ideas about God are not all that can be experienced of God. As C.S. Lewis once observed, human ideas of God must be shattered time after time. Shattered by God. In fact, these fractures are often the marks of God's presence.

Jesus escapes the crowd and withdraws further into the wildness of the mountain. And by withdrawing, Jesus disintegrates their delusions of controlling political power.

In the darkness of that same night, a great storm arose as the disciples are heading home across the sea. Jesus gives his followers yet another sign in a physical act that serves to undermine human expectations and that plays a role in God's Divine love and presence.

While their boat is miles away from shore, well out into the water, the disciples see Jesus walking toward them. They are afraid. And then Jesus blows away their fear with words; words that are not the words of the prophet Moses, but the words that God spoke to Moses in the burning bush; "I am." And then, "Do not fear."

And as soon as the disciples were willing to receive him, they found themselves safely at the shore of Capernaum, their home. That moment concludes the introduction to what we call the Bread of Life discourse. We will hear Jesus teaching from Capernaum for the next four weeks, as we take a break from Mark's Gospel to immerse ourselves in one chapter from John's Gospel – a chapter pregnant with significance for our understanding of the sacraments.

We will hear more stories of symbolic signs that try to direct our eyes and hearts and minds toward the sacramental nature of our lives. Stories to help us receive Christ who comes to us in tangible,

physical, visible things that *reveal* and that *participate* in the real, true Presence of Christ; to take into our bodies, minds and souls the Anointed of God who shatters our expectations, our fears and our addictions.

We will hear the voice of the Anointed who says “no” to our desire to control God or each other, who says “no” to our efforts to be what we are not, “no” to our cravings for safety from suffering.

God will continue to shatter our concepts and certainties until we are sufficiently softened and opened to really hear Christ in the chaos of the storm saying: “I am; do not fear.” Then we may finally be ready to hear God’s loving “yes” to the person that we actually and already are, God’s eternal “yes” to the people for whom Jesus, our brother, died and to whom he now offers the gift of his Body and Blood.

At this table, all pretense is stripped away. We stand with our hands open as nakedly out-of-control, as vulnerable and powerless as babies about to be baptized. And every fragment of our lives is gathered in so that nothing and no one may be lost.

The God who gave existence to the inconceivably enormous star at the center of our solar system comes to us in the astonishing mystery of the Eucharist. And here, at this table, that same God pours unimaginable love into us through the Risen Christ to make us God’s own holy and symbolic signs for the world.

We receive Christ and become the inviting aroma of the bread of life.

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