

“May the words from my lips and the meditations of our hearts always be pleasing to you O God”

In our lectionary we are going to take a break. We are pausing in our reading of the Gospel of Mark and we will spend the next few weeks in John. We will be hearing stories about how Jesus is the bread of life.

The two miracle stories we heard today are some of the most familiar - but usually they are separated. These stories were important for the early Church. The feeding miracle is the only one found in all four Gospels. Jesus walking on water follows the feeding in all but Luke.

For the writer of John’s Gospel these stories unveil key aspects of Jesus’ divine character and purpose.

What are these stories about ? Should we try to explain the miracles? Or do we just read them and be in awe? How do we understand miracles today?

Often the stories about the feeding of the crowds are used to try to encourage giving.

Ross and I lived in St. John’s, Newfoundland for 8 months when he was doing his masters’ in library science. We attended an Anglican church there - old Church, old families & old money.

There were 3 priests for this congregation and 1 of them seemed to be assigned the task of preaching on giving or stewardship. This priest preached what I came to call the “stewardship lecture” and they happened about once a month.

As I kept hearing these sermons I became more and more uncomfortable. We did not have much of an income - Ross was a student on an internship. I was volunteering but had not been able to find paid employment. I started to feel really badly. So I decided to speak to the Priest. And what I heard was that the sermons were directed to people who had a great deal of money but were not very generous in their giving!

I decided then and there that if I were ever to become ordained and serve a congregation I would never, never harangue people from the pulpit about their givings or their generosity.

In some places and at some times this passage from John might be used to try to increase generosity. The miracle of feeding the crowd might be explained by people responding to the generosity of the child by pulling out extra food and then sharing it.

By the way - did anyone even ask the child if they could have his lunch?

But I do not think we need to try to explain away the miracle. In fact I do not think that the miracle was that a loaf of bread and a few fish could be made to feed so many and have leftovers as well.

Jesus saw more than a crowd of people. Jesus saw a need.

The miracle here is that a human being could represent by words and deeds such a sign of hope and healing that hundreds of needy people would follow him and feel that their hunger for the “bread of life” had been met.

The message found in this miracle story - or as John would say - a “sign” is that God can do grand things with very little. This is a message of hope.

And then the story of feeding is paired with the story of Jesus walking on the water. Jesus had removed himself from the crowd - he had gone up the mountain, probably to pray - and to feel closer to God. The disciples had gone on ahead - in a boat once more. The storm comes up and they are terrified. And then the miracle - or sign - Jesus is able to calm the storm.

But I do not think that is the miracle. What is miraculous or awe inspiring in this case is that Jesus’ presence among ordinary, insecure and timid people could calm their anxieties and cause them to walk where they had feared to walk before.

The story of the feeding of the crowd is really a story about God's abundance. Do we trust in that abundance or are we closer to the disciples who questioned how such a small amount could make a difference? Do we believe that there can be enough for everyone?

Sometimes we might feel that the needs of the world are too great for us. That no matter what we might do or think or say or advocate for will not make a difference.

We know, we see such need all around us.

God calls us - each of us and all our gifts to make a difference in the world.

Our Gospel stories today remind us of God's ability to act in surprising ways and to transform human expectations.

Amazing grace is at the core of these stories.

And this is good news - and we are called to proclaim this good news - to share the good news. The good news that we can trust in God's abundance, God's ability to meet the huge needs of a groaning humanity. Jesus shows us abundance and calms the fear.

In the hands of Jesus little can become much, the few can become the many and the weak can become strong. It is the power of Jesus working in the littlest and the least to transform this world into the world God desires, a world where all the hungry are satisfied.

AMEN