

July 28, 2024
Lectionary 17, Year B
The 10th Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:1-21
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Misbehaving

Welcome to a five-week adventure, a five-week excursion into the gospel of John. Now those of you who are real fans of the revised common lectionary might be thinking, “But Pastor, it’s Year B. Shouldn’t our gospel readings be from the gospel of Mark.” You’d be right, but, because Mark is the shortest gospel, there’s some time in Year B dedicated to the gospel of John. And today and the next four weeks is one of those times. So welcome to a five-week adventure in chapter 6 of the gospel of John.

Today, we have two miracle stories in our assigned gospel reading, and for the next four weeks, we’re going to be exploring what the first of those miracles means in terms of Jesus’ identity. The first miracle story in today’s gospel reading is the only miracle story (other than the resurrection) that is shared in all four gospels; the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

The details of the miracle change a little bit from gospel to gospel. For example, in the gospel of Mark, there is no boy who shares the five loaves and two fish for Jesus’ miracle. The gospel of Mark specifies that five thousand men were fed, while the gospel of John says that 5,000 people were fed in all, while the gospel of Matthew mentions that, in addition to the 5,000 men who were fed, women and children were fed as well. Still, in spite of the differences we find in the different gospels’ retelling of this miracle the essentials are the same: there is a great crowd in need of food, Jesus’ disciples do not know who they are going to feed the crowd, Jesus challenges them to give them something to eat, and then, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish, gives thanks for them, and then they are

distributed to the crowd, everyone has enough to eat, and afterward twelve baskets of leftovers are collected by the disciples.

The gospel of John is also the only gospel that then has 50 verses of commentary on what the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 means. That's unique to John, but also very in keeping with that gospel's style. It's those 50 verses of commentary that we're going to be spending time with for the next four weeks.

But today, I'm going to do something a little bit different. You see in my 22 years as a pastor, as a preacher, I have preached on this gospel reading seven times, once every three years, and I have never preached on the story that comes after the feeding of the 5,000, in the gospels of John, Mark, and Matthew, the story of Jesus walking on the water.

A few weeks ago, my daughter, Julia greeted me when I came home from wherever I had been with "Oh, I'm so glad that you're here. I have something really funny to show you." Then she showed me a picture on her phone. It was a picture of a sign on a post in deep water that said, "No Running". And at the bottom of the picture these words were printed: Behave yourself, Jesus.

She was right. It was funny.

So, here's the thing. I think that to our minds, the story of the feeding of the 5000 makes sense. I mean, I don't know how Jesus did it, but its practical applications are clear. Here is someone who can feed thousands with little, who can address the basic human need for food, one of the most essential things we need for life.

On the other hand, walking on water, well...who really needs someone to walk on water? It's an interesting trick, but how useful is that miracle, really, especially when its proximity to the feeding of the 5,000 leads to comparison. They're both amazing miracles, but being able to make five loaves and two fish feed thousands has far more practical applications than walking on water.

Stay with me.

What happened after the feeding of the 5,000? What happened after the disciples gathered up their twelve baskets, full of leftovers from the miracle?

1. People started to say that Jesus was a prophet.
2. Jesus literally headed for the hills; he went away to the mountain by himself.
3. He did that because he saw that people were going to try to make him a king by force and
4. Jesus disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started crossing the lake to Capernaum. The lake they were on is Lake Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee.

I'm curious about that last one. Why did the disciples leave Jesus, presumably praying in the mountains, and take off across the sea of Galilee? Why didn't they stay with him? Why did they leave him behind?

Of course, it's entirely possible that Jesus told them that he needed some time to himself. "Hey guys, I need some time to myself, to pray, connect, refocus." In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus goes to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, he invites the disciples to go with him, but maybe he didn't this time.

Another possibility is that the disciples were quite simply afraid. After all, they saw the same thing that Jesus saw. They saw the crowd, 5,000 strong, ready to come and claim Jesus for themselves, ready to claim him as their king. They saw the danger of a mob, with the added threat of what would look like open rebellion against Rome. Maybe in the face of this threat Jesus ran one way, to the mountain and the disciples, with so many fishermen among them, with so many who made their home, made their livelihoods on the sea, fled to what they knew best, a boat on the sea of Galilee.

Perhaps they waited as long as they thought that they could, waited until evening, before they left without Jesus, but then they had to go, they had to escape the crowd under the cover of darkness.

Whatever reason the disciples had for leaving Jesus behind, for getting into the boat, for not waiting for him to come to them, it was the wrong move. They hadn't been in the boat long before the sea became rough due to a strong wind. They were three or four miles away from shore, fighting against the wind and water and waves, rowing for their lives. Here's a thing about water in the Bible, especially water like this roiling, dangerous, deadly. It's often not just water. It's often a symbol, a reminder, a warning.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

It's a reminder of uncreation, a reminder of the formless void and the chaos waters that God tamed in the first act of creation, sweeping over uncreation and speaking universes, galaxies, worlds, life into being. When you find people in the Bible lost on stormy seas, usually much more is going on than just a storm.

The disciples had left Jesus, the source of life, behind and the waters of uncreation were rising to swallow them up.

And then, across the water, across the waves, the disciples saw what they could have never expected to see. Jesus walking on the water, toward them, coming to their boat, coming to them across the waters of chaos. And they were terrified. Terrified of what he was doing, terrified of what might happen to him, terrified of what it meant that he could do what he was doing.

As I said before, there was a practical application to the feeding of the 5,000. Yes, it was a powerful move, but it was power to a very practical purpose. This was just power, power over the elements, power over the chaos waters, power that could find them anytime anywhere.

In the gospel reading that I just read, Jesus words to his disciples as he walked across the stormy water toward them are translated, “It is I; do not be afraid.” (John 6:20) But that’s not an exact translation of the Greek words in the gospel. The Greek words in the gospel are “*Ego Eimi*” which means, “I am”. That means that what Jesus actually said was “I Am. Do not be afraid.” By saying, “I Am” Jesus was claiming for himself the ancient and most sacred name for God. It was not the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last. He spoke those words as he stood on the waves, mastered the waters of chaos. Just as God had done in creation.

The disciples wanted to take him into the boat, to make him act like, seem like an ordinary, though extraordinary man. But that’s not what happened. They didn’t get to take control of this situation. Instead, the boat reached the land they had been heading for. Jesus got them where they were going without ever setting foot in the boat.

The story of Jesus walking on the water, defies the caption of the picture that Julia showed me, “Behave yourself, Jesus.” The story of Jesus walking on the water tells us that Jesus isn’t going to behave.

He is more than a prophet. And he isn’t going to let a mob make him their king on their terms and not on his. He is God, and his power is for creation and for life and he will overcome any obstacle to bring that life into the world.

The practical application of Jesus walking on the water, is that it shows us who he is. He is the great I Am who has power over the chaos of this world, who comes and finds us when we’re running scared, who will not let the powers of this world set his agenda, and yes, he feeds us too. Thanks be to God. Amen.