

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

New Testament Lesson—Mark 6:30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

As you know, we've taken a brief journey through some of the more astonishing miracles of the Bible over the past couple months. We've surveyed a few from both testaments—looking both at constructive and destructive miracles—"happy" miracles and not-so-happy ones.

And I admit: I've chosen some "deep cuts" on purpose. I wanted to bring up some stories I don't think get enough attention—if any at all from the pulpit.

In fact, I came across an article this week that really resonated with me. It was featured in *Sojourners* magazine—FYI just a top-notch publication—highly recommended.

Anyway, the article's title was "Biblical Literacy as Resistance." I saw that and thought, "What a marvelous concept!"

In an age when Biblical literacy's in sharp decline—when having a deep familiarity with Scripture just isn't common like it once was (for many reasons)...why not think of learning the Bible as a means to bring justice where it's most needed?

Now, I'm not talking about learning all the Bible stuff to impress people or pass tests. I'm not talking about memorizing a ton of verses to seem like a better Christian than other people—certainly not to prop yourself up in a self-righteous way—not to lord your knowledge over others.

Instead: Why not think of knowing Scripture as a way of pushing back against the powers that pollute, corrupt, and dehumanize?

Why not study the gospels so that, when someone tries to argue that Jesus would be in favor of something patently ridiculous, we might confidently object with actual evidence from Scripture that reveals the truth?

Because: Sadly, there will always be those who use the Bible as a weapon to put others down, while bolstering their own power and privilege. There will always be those who cherry pick verses out of context—those who lob harmful texts like grenades while ignoring the loads of biblical evidence that refutes their flimsy points.

We can resist evil through Biblical literacy, my friends. Together, we can learn what Jesus actually said about women and sexual minorities. Together, we can study what the Bible actually says about wealth and gender and the environment.

I assure you: God's word has something to say to us about every single issue facing our nation and world. I believe that with all my heart. And I can promise you this, too: the message of Scripture always errs on the side of love and mercy. It always stands with the vulnerable and the oppressed—with those yearning to breathe free.

That being said, our final story of this sermon series happens to be one of the most well-known of Christ's miracles. It's a powerful demonstration of God's love and desire to provide for the masses.

It's truly one of those "feel-good" stories that we appreciate and enjoy talking about. Right? It doesn't get much better than the Good Shepherd leading his people to a green pasture, setting them down, and breaking bread with them.

And, for those reasons, this is an easy story to preach on. It's got good news coming out of every corner—gospel just beaming off the page.

But that isn't necessarily why I picked this story. No, I chose this particular miracle to wrap up this series because it holds a special recognition among the gospels.

The "feeding of the multitudes" is the only one of Jesus's public miracles that you'll find in all four gospels. And that's a big deal. Think about it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each thought this story was important enough to tell.

And well...As a preacher, that tells me this one deserves more of our attention. That tells me we need to spend some extra time with this story—tells me we need to sit among the multitudes for a while.

Since I just made this whole sales pitch about Biblical literacy, let me give you some advice if that's a road you're thinking about taking.

As you know, the Bible is a vast library of books spanning centuries, dozens of literary genres, and even more authors. And every one of those authors has a specific historical context, a particular point of view, and a certain theological agenda.

I'm telling you: Each one of those ancient writers wanted to communicate something specific to their communities. To that end, they emphasized certain things about Jesus's life and ministry—things they believed were worth telling—stories more important than other stories.

So, here's the pro tip: those things the Bible talks about over and over are the things we should pay more attention to. If Scripture keeps repeating the same message across testament and author and time period, we should take notice!

On the flip side, I think we do well to pay less attention to things one or two authors might say once or twice, in passing, to one group of people.

In other words, when something the Bible barely touches on becomes a cornerstone of your belief system, I would encourage you to pause and ask why. Why is something so Biblically insignificant so important for you?

Well, despite their different communities and perspectives on Jesus, all four gospel writers wanted to make sure we knew about this miracle story.

According to Mark's version, Jesus and his friends are so busy trying to navigate all these crowds that they themselves don't get a chance to eat. But, despite his own hunger, Jesus could see the people were craving a hopeful word—like sheep without a shepherd.

From there, Mark says Jesus went on to teach them many things. And this goes on all day. I guess time flies when you're having fun with Jesus.

How about it? You think we could try that—just go on preaching right through lunch—wrap it up sometime this afternoon? Huh? No? Ahh, that's too bad...

At any rate, at some point the disciples realize how many hours have gone by. They recognize, rightly, that these people haven't eaten all day. But they're also starving themselves. Jesus has got to be famished too, surely.

Maybe if all these people just go away, they can finally inhale the five loaves of bread and two fish they've to share between them. It's not much, but it's better than nothing. It'll be enough for now at least.

But, as we know, things don't go the way they expected. Such is life, I suppose. When the disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the crowds, he flips the script—like he often does.

In a desperate rush to satisfy their own hunger, the disciples seem to assume that everyone in these crowds can afford their daily bread—that they all have money to buy food. Considering how many are present, that's not likely the case.

Instead, Christ commands his friends: You give them something to eat. You give them something to eat.

Eat what, Jesus? A bunch of grass? Oh, let's just take from our portable granary here. No problem. Done and done...

Now, I can't remember the disciples get smart with Jesus a lot. It's rare they would take such an attitude with him. But they get a bit cheeky here.

"Oh, sure Jesus. It's a good thing we're filthy rich and can just go into town, buy up all the bread around to give a few thousand people a free meal! Never mind how we're going to bring all that food back here. Good plan, my dude."

You probably know the rest of the story. Christ asks his friends to bring him what little food they brought with them to hold them over—barely enough to feed their small entourage.

But, in the hands of Jesus (the Son of God), "barely enough" for them turns into "more than enough" for thousands. In a very sacramental way, he blesses and breaks the bread, gives it to his friends who go on to serve what becomes a great feast with twelve baskets of leftovers.

We have to use our imaginations here, though. Mark doesn't tell us anything about the logistics of how so many people were served. I mean, I'm curious. Aren't you?

Did loads of bread and fish just “appear” before each group of fifty and a hundred? Did the disciples have to go around to every group and distribute from some magical, bottomless basket of food that never ran out? How many hours would that have taken, I wonder...

We get the basics of the miracle. We know thousands were fed when it should’ve been impossible to feed that many. But, imagine with me a different possibility.

Imagine all the groups of people that, like Jesus and the disciples, might have had a few emergency rations on them to hold them over—some with more, some with less.

Putting aside the supernatural, the only way all these folks are getting fed is if everyone readily shares what they’ve secretly brought. The only way to satisfy everyone is by sharing what we have with gratitude—to look upon the strangers in our midst with the same grace and generosity we would have for our good friends and family.

Imagine Christ looking to heaven, blessing the meager resources they have, and unleashing the Holy Spirit among all those gathered. Imagine hearts opening wide with compassion for those seated near them. Imagine the grace upon grace given and received.

Friends: I firmly believe that when we trust God with our resources, we will have enough. When our hearts are opened, and we serve our neighbors with the love of Christ, we’ll find there is always more than enough.

And noticing that there is always more than enough grace to go around is nothing short of miraculous.

With faith and mercy at the center of our service, we should expect baskets of leftovers. With the love of Christ at the heart of all we do, our cups runneth over.

May it be so.

Amen.