

Jesus Makes the Impossible Possible
John 6:1-21
Ephesians 3:14-21

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 6:1-21

After this 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 towards 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 lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake 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 towards which they were going.

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Our gospel reading this morning, at first glance, looks like different stories, but I believe that it is really one story.

First, Jesus leaves Capernaum, the town where he is, and goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is the largest freshwater lake in that part of the world. It's about eight miles across. In North American terms, the Sea of Galilee is much smaller than any of the Great Lakes, but it's the size of about thirteen Buckeye Lakes.¹ If you are in the middle, you cannot see either side, in good conditions. That detail matters, later.

Jesus goes up the mountain and sits with his disciples. But he looks up, and there is a large crowd coming toward him. This should not really be a surprise: he has been miraculously healing sick people. I suspect I'd be following him, too.

All these people are out in the wilderness, a couple hours' walk from the nearest town. They have taken boats across the sea. Jesus asks Philip, "Where are we going to buy food for all these people?"

Philip looks at the crowd, does a quick estimate, and tells Jesus that six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each person to get even a little.

Andrew speaks up and tells Jesus and the disciples that there's a boy here with his lunch. But that's not going to be enough for all these people, obviously.

Jesus tells his disciples to make the people sit down, and they do. There are about five thousand people here.

Jesus prays over the food, giving thanks to God for what God has provided, and he distributes it to the people. He gives them all as much bread and fish as they want.

¹ For reference: The Sea of Galilee is 64 square miles; Buckeye Lake is just under 5 square miles. Lake Ontario, the smallest of the Great Lakes, is 7,540 square miles.

When they're done eating, he tells the disciples to gather up all the leftovers, to avoid waste. They do, and they have twelve baskets of bread, more food left over than they started with!

I'm sure that Jesus could have produced just enough food to feed the people who were there. That would have been rational, and prudent. But no, Jesus chooses to err on the side of abundance. He produces not only enough food, but more than enough.

The people are amazed. They say to each other, "This is the prophet who was predicted." They want to take Jesus to Jerusalem and crown him king right then, whether he wants that or not. This would be a revolutionary act, starting a war between the Jewish people and the Roman Empire.

That, however, is not what Jesus wants. He responds by going up the mountain by himself. The disciples, apparently, deal with calming the crowd down and sending them all home.

It starts to get dark, and the disciples still haven't seen Jesus. They look at each other and nod. Jesus is off praying, or resting. Staying the night here in the wilderness doesn't sound like fun, when there's a perfectly good town right across the lake. And Jesus will catch up. So, they go down to the lake, get into a boat, and head across the lake toward Capernaum.

They get about halfway across, and the sea gets rough. There is a strong wind, and high waves. The disciples get scared, as well they should.

As strange as this may seem to us, swimming was not common in their world. Even fishermen, who earned their living on the water, would usually not know how to swim, because the sea was the source of primal chaos in their world. Sea monsters lived there. Who wants to

voluntarily spend time in the sea, to learn how to swim? These guys, who likely cannot swim, are in the middle of the sea in a small boat, at night, and it's storming.

Then, just to make their terrifying situation complete, they see a man walking on the water, headed toward them. If it were me, this would probably be enough to send me, if not over the edge, close to it. As a general rule, people do not walk on water. Ghosts and spirits and monsters walk on water. This is not supposed to be happening.

One of the disciples stutters out, "Who's there?"

Jesus says to them, "I am. Do not be afraid."

These words are brief, and simple.

These words in a familiar voice change the situation.

Now, the disciples are not afraid. They know that Jesus is with them, and that means that they are safe. It seems like no time at all until they are standing on the beach near Capernaum.

All through this story, Jesus errs on the side of abundance. He could have made just enough food for himself and his disciples. He could have told the crowd that he had come into the wilderness to get away from people, that he had not asked them to come out there, and that they were on their own.

But no. He makes so much food for all the people that they have more left over than they started with.

That night, Jesus could have stood on the beach with a torch, or even built a bonfire. That would have shown the disciples which way to go, and given them some security in the midst of the storm. If that were not enough, I'm sure that, given the storm, he could have borrowed some fisherman's unused boat and gone out to where they were.

But no. Jesus does not even take the time that would have been required to grab a boat off the beach. He goes to his disciples where they are. And he tells them, “I am here. Do not be afraid.”

This Winter, we have been asking the question, who is this guy Jesus? We’ve been walking through the early part of his earthly ministry, looking at what he does for lessons about who he is. We saw that he is not looking for fans, he’s looking for followers. He is looking for followers to point to him the way that John the Baptist did: pointing people to him and doing his will in the world.

Jesus does not want to be a king. That would be a demotion. Jesus is God, and Jesus wants our hearts, not merely secular power. Jesus does not want to merely fit into our existing power structures; Jesus wants to wipe them away as he did the moneychangers in the Temple, and create a new rule, based not on greed, but on love.

Jesus has real power, and he uses it in the world for human beings. Not just the human beings who love him, but all human beings. That means that, when he says at the Last Supper that our sins are forgiven, we can trust that promise. That means that, when he talks about the Kingdom of God, we better listen, because we’re going to live there. We are supposed to live like we’re citizens of the Kingdom of God now.

Jesus wants all of us to be free to worship God, because, as he told Nicodemus, God so loved not just a few people, but the whole *cosmos* so much that God sent his only-begotten son down here, to be born, live, die, and be resurrected for our sakes. Anything that we do that gets in the way of anyone worshipping God is sin and it is wrong.

Jesus came to earth so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. He didn't come to tell us all how bad we were, though we are. He didn't come down here to personally tell the world off. He came to save the world. Not just some people. All people. And not just the people. Jesus came to redeem the whole world, the entire cosmos!

Jesus brings in the outsiders, whoever the outsiders are. He does it whether the insiders like it or not. For that matter, he does it whether the outsiders like it or not. Duane Priebe said, "Every time you draw a line between who's in and who's out, you'll find Jesus on the other side." My experience is that Jesus is usually standing there, trying to wipe out the line in the sand with his foot. That's because Jesus came here for all of us. Not just the insiders, whoever the insiders are this century, or this decade, or this year. All of us. All of us are children of God.

And, this week, we see that, as long as we are faithfully following Jesus, there will be enough, somehow. And Jesus will go far beyond what we think is reasonable, to take care of us and to walk with us, even when the sea is storming all around us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.