

Sermon - Proper 12, Year B
John 6:1-21
7/28/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The oldest texts found within the Bible are portions of the psalms – coming to us from songs repeated some four thousand years ago. The most recent texts within the Bible are found in the Book of Revelation and parts of the Gospel of John, these written sometime between 90 and 110 AD, give or take. The Bible as we know it today was, in fact, not agreed upon until church councils in the fourth century, just after when St. Athanasius wrote a list of the New Testament Canon in an Easter letter addressed to the churches he served as bishop. It is fascinating to imagine this time in history when the texts that would become The Bible were so fresh in the Christian imagination. These centuries still featured “dynasties” of apostles – teachers who had been students of teachers who had been students of the first disciples. St. Irenaeus was a disciple of St. Polycarp who was a disciple of St. John. These stories were not abstract or distant, but dynamic and alive.

There is a corpus of writing from these centuries that spends time exploring the lives of players in the biblical narrative, some of them more obscure than others. Famously, there is a letter that explores the early life of the Virgin Mary and her parents. There is a letter that contemplates the life of the so-called “good thief” hanging upon the cross at the side of Jesus: the one to whom Jesus says, “today you will be with me in paradise.” He is given the name Dismas. There is a famous recollection of the martyrdom of St. James, whose Feast the Church celebrated last week. According to this story, James was betrayed by one of the temple teachers, but when this teacher saw James bravely face his own death, the teacher himself confessed the name of Christ and was beheaded by Herod alongside the apostle he had persecuted.

There are countless similar texts – not scripture, but ancient meditations on the lives of those who first sought to follow Jesus. The scholars tell us that some of these are very likely to be accurate recollections of historic events. Others, perhaps a bit of pious legend. But these stories animate something within us as we imagine the events surrounding the life of Jesus. This is the power of the Incarnation at work – Jesus was not just some Greek god descending from Mount Olympus disguised as a human being, but in fact a true man who was also truly God, present with us in the history of our created world, spending time with very real, very relatable people.

And so, all of this to say, that I was surprised and disappointed when in my own research I could not find any fulsome meditations about the small boy with the five loaves and two fish. The Gospel text from St. John this morning recalls to us how Jesus miraculously provides for the feeding of five thousand people in the wilds of a deserted place. It is a familiar story in our churches on Sundays, and its importance is heightened by the fact that it is the only miracle of Jesus (besides the Resurrection itself) that is featured in every single one of the four Gospels. Each evangelist - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - tells very nearly the same story. Jesus, wearied from ministry, tries to retreat from the crowds to rest. The people, understandably, are not yet ready to leave him be. They follow, and in his compassion, Jesus heals their sick and continues his teaching. As evening approaches, the disciples urge their rabbi to send the great crowds out into the nearby villages to find food and provision. They are, after all, in the wilderness. It is a “desert place,” and there is nothing to feed them there.

Jesus, as we know, has something entirely different in mind, and when the disciples come up with only a meager offering of five loaves and two fish, Jesus takes them to himself, blesses

and breaks the loaves, and there is not a hungry belly in that wild place that is not fed abundantly.

This event is so prominent in the bible and so repeated throughout the history of the Church, because its richness forms a sort of miniature catechism. In this one comparatively small story, we are welcomed into some of the greatest and most important truths of the Christian faith. We find Jesus gathering up the story of God's provision in the past. With this miraculous food in the wilderness, Jesus points to his fulfillment of God's care for Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus tells us that he has not come to abolish the law or the Old Testament covenant, but to fulfill it, and this miracle food recalls God's blessing of manna in the desert during the Exodus. As Moses led the wandering and hungry Israelites through the desert for forty years, God provided nourishment for them, and they were sustained according to God's promise. In Jesus, God's nourishment continues and is fulfilled.

There is not only a gathering up of the past here as miracles abound on the hillside. As he carries out his blessed provision, Jesus also reaches his embrace around the future. Jesus moves through a series of actions that present a foretaste of the Holy Eucharist. He takes the food, looks up to heaven, blesses the loaves and breaks them, and then hands them to the disciples who feed not merely their own band of apostles, but everyone who has come to listen. The next time when Jesus will complete these very same actions will be at the Last Supper before his crucifixion, where the bread of the table will become nothing less than the Bread of Life: Jesus himself, in Body and Blood.

Jesus fulfills the promise of the past and foreshadows the glory of the future, but he also provides for the *need* of the present: providing food in such abundance that fully twelve baskets

are gathered as leftovers. Past, present, and future: all held within the hands of the Savior who will redeem them all.

And the food was first offered by a small boy. Even the pious legends don't give us much about him, but he is at the very heart of this Gospel. Just a small boy, presumably with a parent or guardian, who had likely been the one tasked with carrying the lunch basket for his family. It is likely that he was a boy from modest means. Barley loaves and two fish – this is the food of workers and the poor. Perhaps there were younger siblings or an older relative that depended on him and upon that small basket of lunch. Perhaps he saw the grown adult apostles walking through the crowd and was nervous to speak to the men who accompanied the famous teacher. Perhaps his mother urged him forward.

All we know is that an ordinary child offered an ordinary gift in faith, and with it, Jesus showed the world the glory of God.

This is the work of the Christian life. We show up together. We listen to the teachings of Jesus. And we offer in faith whatever we have, no matter how small. Perhaps sometimes we need to be encouraged by others or to encourage them ourselves. But God will always receive what we offer, and we can never know how many people Christ might feed with our faith and our generosity. Five loaves. Two fish. One prayer. One song. One act of love. One apology. One offering of forgiveness. One defiant hope. One extended hand. One new morning.

By our small gift, may the world proclaim: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”