

“God of the In Between”
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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The scripture reading today follows immediately after last week’s tale of Herod, Herodias, their child, and gruesome consequences for John the Baptist.

Today includes regrouping, journeying, and meeting the waiting crowds.

When you read the Bible, remember that you are reading something that someone wrote, and that someone edited. In today’s case, the person is traditionally referred to as Mark. As with last week, you are getting Mark’s version of events.

We also are a lectionary tradition, meaning some editors went through the Bible and selected readings for each Sunday, including this one. The lectionary editors thought we should just read these particular parts and not worry about the rest for now.

The main thing about this passage that got to me was its shape.

What do I mean by that? You see in your bulletin that this selection very intentionally stops after just four verses, and then picks up again for another four verses at the end of this chapter.

When figuring out what to preach, I always try to read all around the lectionary selection — right before it, right after it, for better context — and in the case of something like today, I really want to know what has been omitted.

You know what’s cut out? The feeding of the 5000, one of his best known miracles! Walking on water, another of his very best known miracles!

Fine, we cut things out all the time, to focus more fully on them later. For instance, it would be normal for next week to consider what comes next, and the following week what’s after that. If we were in the Old Testament, the lectionary walks through 2 Samuel for several weeks, following the thread of the story for more or less the entire summer.

Maybe we’ll get there later, right? No — the feeding miracles in Mark 6 and 8 aren’t in the lectionary at all! You can come to church every Sunday for the next three years, and those verses are never designated for any week. After this we skip to John for the next few weeks.

This is a strange passage! We have a gospel, telling us about a famous teacher and worker of miracles, and we are given a text that doesn’t include his teaching or other instruction other than where to meet up, and we have those begging for him to exert his power, without really seeing that done. True, some seem to benefit by touching his cloak, but that’s not action taken by Jesus, it is something done by the crowd, we don’t get to see Jesus personally acting.

The author believes it important to tell us that the disciples did not have enough time to eat, but it is not for us to know this week that Jesus then fed 5000 men, and probably triple that if you count human beings present. The feeding of the 15000! Pretty impressive!

It is considered important to tell us that the disciples arrived in Gennesaret by boat, but not for us to know that Jesus made most of the trip on foot.

Given that, what do we make of the writing that is left for us to study?

I pulled out my Oxford Annotated Bible, purchased for serious Bible study. It tells you various Greek and Hebrew meanings and shades of meaning, gives all manner of historical background, refers you to other places throughout the Old and New Testaments. The footnotes say this is a transitional passage. OK, what else?

These passages tell us that when the followers of Jesus gathered, they didn't even have time to eat. My first thought was How About That. I guess Jesus and the Apostles weren't Methodists, because we always make time to have a bite. It isn't that they are sleepy, so much as they are spent from their labors, labors so much that **even the king** had heard what they were doing. They needed rest, and so they came to Jesus. A good practice for us to follow, too.

Note that the text doesn't say the crowds came to hear him preach. They came to have their needs met, needs that were not being met anywhere else, or by anyone else. We can clearly see that they are making a lot of effort to get to Jesus, lots of effort to get the healing they need.

We can see that Jesus's notoriety was pretty considerable by this point. How so? Well, he told his followers to meet him in the desert, and then again told them to meet him in a seaside village, and in both places crowds met them desperate to interact with him. And yet, we aren't told what he actually did, what actually happened! That omission boggles me.

Think about books you have enjoyed that have been turned into films. Something is **always** edited out — but usually, what's left are the big action scenes. It's the opposite here, the action scenes are cut and we have what's left.

Let's try this approach with a few more stories. Romeo and Juliet — two young people meet, each with a huge crush on the other... but it doesn't work out. (*That story loses a LOT if you leave out everything that happens in the middle.*) Or Titanic — two very good-looking young people meet, each with a huge crush on the other... but it doesn't work out. Also, the boat sinks.

Both of these summaries are true, both are technically accurate — and both completely missing the point of these stories. What can we possibly get out of passages that skip over the good parts? Well, for one thing, just what are the good parts? What makes them good?

You have had great excitement in your lives, you have been a part of great exciting things — but for most people, that isn't the entirety of your life. My life involves a LOT of laundry, washing a LOT of dishes, and endless trips to the grocery store.

I have a pretty good life, have had some good times — but most of it is spent doing again and again the everyday things most of us do, provided we are fortunate enough to have clothes that need washing, provided we have access to enough food, provided we have a place to live that needs cleaning and other maintenance. It is mundane to be sure, but it is a lot of what we do with our lives.

The thing I hear in these verses is the presence of God in the in-between times, in the in-between spaces.

We have come here this morning to this beautiful place, bringing all the more beauty into it with music, with poetic scripture and prayers, with a presence that involves love for one another and joy at seeing loved ones — all of which is good. The big reminder to me in these scriptures is that God is in all things, at all times, even the mundane, maybe especially the mundane.

Let me cut to the chase — well, in the spirit of things, instead let's cut away from the chase and see what's left. What most often theologians see in these scriptures is an affirmation of the need for rest. Jesus had already showed compassion to the apostles themselves. They returned from their journey, and he is providing rest for them. He demonstrated that he was a good shepherd by having compassion and providing rest for them. “Then he saw the people, in need of a shepherd, and had compassion once again.”

Tired or not, the needs of the people are most important. Compassion dictates Jesus' life and ministry both to his disciples and to others. As Christians, Jesus is the example, and if you believe that, then your example is of one that puts value on compassion and care, and on taking care of people's basic earthly needs.

What are the other lessons for us here this morning?

The world is a noisy place, a demanding place, and we have gathered here for renewal. Before you reenter the space where crowds of one kind or another are waiting for your responses, and others are hungering for your compassion, take a moment to be in conversation with the Lord about what you may need to tend to and what you need to rest from. You have heard the Word of the Lord. Listen for the quiet voice in there that is **just for you**.

I am going to disagree with the lectionary editors, because in the part that was skipped over there is a passing but important point — they were not headed to Gennesaret but to Bethsaida — not where they wanted to go — **but they ended up where they were needed**. That seems critical to one of the most important takeaways from this oddball bit of scripture. You may not be where you envision, but there is a good chance you are right where God needs you, individually or as a church.

When the Lord beckons you to deserted places so that you may find rest with him, go. You probably need it more than you realize.

When unwelcome strangers and unwanted guests interrupt your agendas and productivity, have compassion on them.

Make time to tend to your bodies, minds, and spirits, so that you may be fully present with the people who anticipate your attention, and offer that to those who have interrupted.

The boat landed in Gennesaret, even though in v 45 it says that they were headed for Bethsaida. Despite the Lord's personally calming it, the storm still blew them off course. They landed in a city they were not trying to reach, and yet when they get there they simply start doing ministry. And the need for ministry was everywhere — villages, cities, or farming communities.

Jesus had a plan, and it got blown off course — so rather than focus on staying as close to that plan as possible, he did the best ministry he could where he was. And why not? It says that the people recognized him immediately! There was need, and so he responded.

We don't get to the main, expected part. Instead, what we get is an emphasis on the fact that a side trip taken by accident turned out to be thoroughly worthwhile, despite no one asking for it or planning for it.

Here we are as a church — I've been talking to a lot of people about all the plans we had that got derailed by COVID. Plans for maybe a mission trip, for book and Bible studies, for pasta dinners, and on and on and on. We got blown off course. And now here we are. How do we respond? By trying to get back on course? Sure, absolutely! But in the meantime, we have opportunities. I promise you, in the not too distant future, people will join this congregation that first worshipped with us online, using a setup that didn't exist a year ago.

Today, we are reminded that the process IS the point. That the getting there together is every bit as important as what we do when we get there. We are also reminded that our plans may not be God's plans. We are reminded that if the unexpected derails our intentions, it may be that God is using us in a way we would not have chosen for ourselves.

My path to ministry was a long one, with many careers along the way, many detours that turned out to be important building blocks for future ministry that I hadn't yet identified, let alone considered. I am convinced that in God's economy, nothing is wasted.

Where is this pandemic taking us? Where is this time of social unrest and political tension taking us? Certainly not where we wanted to be! Who's needs might we be able to meet, that we might not even have met if things had gone according to our own plans? Woodbury UMC, what is to become of us? If you truly believe that God is in the mix, then I am excited for us to learn the answer, one detour at a time, together. Amen.