

2 August 2020 Proper 13 A Track 2

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalms 145:8-9, 15-22

Matthew 14:13-21

Recently, I've been reflecting on the word *apocalypse*. I bet you're thinking that such a focus is a clear sign I've been staying-at-home alone too long. No worries, I have a good reason.

I was drawn to reflect on *apocalypse* by something I heard from Parker Palmer. If you don't know him, Parker Palmer, a native of Chicago, is a wise Quaker elder who is an educator, activist, and author of numerous books. In discussing this pandemic of COVID19, Palmer brought up the idea of *apocalypse* and pointed out that *apokálypsis*, the root word in Greek, means revelation or *lifting the veil*. He then asked the question "What is being revealed in this time of pandemic?"

I think we could each quickly list many negative or disturbing revelations we are seeing all too clearly now the veil is lifted: the distrust of real experts in science and public health, the impacts of inequality in income and access to health care, the widespread ongoing and pervasive sin of racism, and the effects of divided politics and chaotic leadership. This is a partial list at best.

But what I've been pondering is, what is being revealed that is life-giving? When we emerge on the other side to what some are calling a "new normal", are there any new realizations we will want to carry with us? I suggest that in the coming days and weeks you might ponder this question too. You could begin with what is being revealed to us via this morning's gospel.

In the reading today from Matthew, we heard a very familiar story. Even those unfamiliar with the gospels might know what the phrase "multiplication of the loaves and fishes"

means – at least every cook who has suddenly had to accommodate unexpected extra dinner guests knows. Your mind might have gone to a remembered illustration from a children’s Bible or a stained glass window, or one of the dramatizations in popular movies of the life of Jesus. We know it so well because this story is one of only two that appears in all four gospels – the other is Jesus’ walking on water. In fact, in Matthew and Mark, there is a second story of another miraculous feeding not long after this one – different crowd and location but same menu, except now it’s seven loaves and a few fish and those fed number four thousand men, still not counting the women and children. Clearly, this story of miraculous feeding was very important to the early church in spreading the message of Jesus’ ministry.

This story is so familiar you might think there is nothing new here. One of the drawbacks of the lectionary is that often we hear scripture passages plucked out of context. In these slow summer days of Ordinary Time, for the last few weeks we’ve heard parables from Matthew 13 about the sower, a tiny mustard seed, the leaven, the pearl of great price and so on: all metaphors Jesus used to teach about the Kingdom of Heaven. What we don’t hear is the text between those parables and today’s reading. Now, I know the bible is not a non-fiction history book and the timelines don’t always line up. Still, I think it is helpful to go to the end of chapter 13 to find out what Jesus did after explaining the Kingdom of Heaven parables to his disciples.

He went to his hometown – Nazareth – to teach in the synagogue there. At first, the people are amazed to hear what he is saying. But they quickly turn cynical and deride him. Isn’t this Mary’s son, the kid who worked for his carpenter father? Where did he get these ideas? Who does he think he is? Their hostility is so strong, Jesus proclaims that prophets are not without honor except in their own house. Unable to heal or perform any other signs in the face of their negative energy, he leaves.

Then Chapter 14 opens in the royal court of Herod who is disturbed about the tales he is hearing of Jesus teaching and healing in the countryside. Herod has a guilty mind and

fears this Jesus is really John the Baptist come back from the dead. The gospel then recounts the imprisonment and execution of John – I'll spare you the salacious details of Salome's dance – ending with John's disciples burying his body and going to tell Jesus. Our reading today omitted the opening phrase of verse 13: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

That is how we get to Jesus this morning. Think about this context – Jesus has just been laughed at and scorned in his hometown and received the news that his cousin John has been executed because of what John was preaching. What is going on in the very human mind and heart of Jesus? Is he discouraged and depleted? Is he fearful that his speaking truth to power as John did will derail his own ministry before his time? He has been healing and teaching all over the countryside and explaining things over and over again to his apostles who still aren't getting it. You might identify with his mood. No wonder he needs to get away by himself, to a deserted place. He needs to sleep. He needs to talk with God his Abba. He needs some good R&R to recharge.

But here comes the crowd again, bringing their loved ones who are ill and in need of healing. Like every healthcare provider we have recently seen who has thinks they have no more reserves but still somehow manages to continue giving care, Jesus sees the crowd, and compassion breaking open his heart, he cures their sick.

Now the disciples, perhaps sensing their Rabbi is exhausted at the end of another long day, tell Jesus to send the people away to find food for themselves. And here is what I see as the turning point in this story – Jesus pulls the disciples into a partnership and says, "they need not go away; YOU give them something to eat." Clearly, the disciples have a "deer in the headlights" reaction: "We can't feed all these people, we have nothing here, except some bread and fish." Still, Jesus pulls them in, telling the disciples to bring what they have to him and to gather and seat the people on the ground. These are all actions that lay the groundwork for being able to feed the crowd that day, beyond all expectations.

It was only a little over four months ago when Bishop Lee issued a statement that, in order to comply with the Governor's stay-at-home orders and to support public health measures, effective March 15 there would be no public gathering in Episcopal church buildings, for meetings or worship. Speaking for myself, upon reading this news, I had my own "deer in the headlights" moment – although I suspect I was not the only one with that reaction. Mine was on two levels. As a Roman Catholic turned Episcopalian, gathering around a table and receiving communion is an integral part of my communal worship. My thought for myself was "how can that be, what will I do?"

Immediately followed my thoughts of concern for this community we call St. Lawrence Church. We had come off of a several years-long discernment of what our future might be in the face of a financial reality we could no longer ignore behind a veil. Group discernment is not easy, and we weren't finished. An unanswered question was, and remains, when we sell the building where will we gather as church? Then, we began this year bidding Godspeed to Patti and Tom and by March we were still unsuccessful in identifying an interim rector. We had no consistent pastoral presence and priest to lead worship. Now suddenly the bishop declares the building we still have is closed to us.

My thoughts escalated. What will happen? Look at those churches with rectors who know how to live stream services on Facebook. Look at Washington National Cathedral, with their great audio and multiple camera format broadcasts on YouTube. Will people search for other places to worship? Will they come back? From conversations with a few of you, I know I was not alone in my concerns.

And then.....

How to feed spiritually hungry people in the face of limited resources? They need not go away; YOU give them something to eat.

What do you mean we give them something to eat? We have nothing here except...
...except Joy and Alan and a few who others who quilted together creative worship
videos to help us on our pilgrim walk through Holy Week to Easter.

And then....

What do you mean we give them something to eat? We have nothing here except...
...except this technology called Zoom and a few people who know how to use it; and a
few people willing to lead worship; and a few people willing to offer reflections; and the
Book of Common Prayer.

What is being revealed to us in this moment when we cannot be church in the way we
always knew? We're learning that we can do much without gathering in a building.
We're learning that we can feed the physically hungry with a drive-through food pantry.
We're learning that one-on-one phone calls to members who are alone at home are
important pastoral care. We're learning that at least 100 people feel invested enough in
St. Lawrence Church that they spent their time completing the CAT survey to participate
in the Rector Search process. We're learning that we can feed one another's spiritual
hunger by bringing the resources and skills we each have, gathering in the only way we
can, helping each other sit down in front of computers or tablets to ground ourselves
and connect on Sunday morning. We're learning how to be communion for each other.

Let me be clear – when those red doors open and we ALL feel comfortable gathering
together for Eucharist, I will be right there. But until that future time, I will be right here
as often as possible, because these days there is no place I feel more in spiritual
communion than with all of you at 9AM on Sunday mornings. Here at St. Lawrence
Church in this season of pandemic we are revealing to one another that there are many
ways we can gather for communion – sometimes we even use bread.

Amen.