

A Storytelling Commentary on John 6:1-21

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These two stories, the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water, are stories that the Gospel of John shares with the synoptics. But as always, John develops these stories in highly distinctive ways. The story of the feeding of the 5000 is an introduction to a long speech of Jesus interpreting the significance of the bread. That theme will provide the overall story for the next five weeks of lectionary. The story is introduced by Jesus' response to the large crowd that was following him, that is, he goes up on the mountain. This is the first of many motifs in this story in which Jesus acts like Moses. John develops the associations to Passover, the time of Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

The distinctive elements of this Johannine version of the feeding of the 5000 are present in its introduction as well as in the specifics of the story. Jesus asks Philip at the very beginning, "How are we going to provide bread for all these people?" and Philip is utterly flabbergasted. He has no idea how to respond and as he says, "Six months wages couldn't buy enough bread for each of these to have even a little." Philip is responding to the reality of the situation. So also is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, when he identifies the young man who has five barley loaves and two fish. It's a joke in relation to what these little bits of food are going to do for all these people.

John focuses the humor of this story on the contrast between the number of people and the amount of available food. He highlights the impossibility of feeding all these people with the little bit that they have. John also identifies that Jesus said this to Philip in order to test him, because he knew what he was going to do. This is a motif that runs through the whole of this chapter: Jesus' foreknowledge of what is going to take place. In this case, the spirit in which you want to tell the first part of this story is on the one hand the spirit of Passover—Jesus going up on the mountain to the place of power and authority—and on the other hand the humor of the questions and responses between Jesus and Philip and Andrew.

I remember a person Clay Woodberry telling this story at the first Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers. Clay told it in a way that was absolutely delightful because he Philip and Andrew's puzzlement: "How are we going to feed all these people with *this*?!!!" I highly recommend that spirit as a way to tell this story.

The feeding of the 5000 has many connections with the gift of the manna in the story of the exodus and of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness. People recognized that sign and said, "This is the prophet who is coming into the world." Identifying these connections evoked the expectation for John's listeners that there would be a prophet like Moses who would come. It was a distinctive form of the expectation of a coming messiah. This is not the expectation of the Davidic messiah who was a military leader, but rather the Mosaic messiah who would do the signs that Moses did. So Jesus here is

doing the sign of Moses: feeding the people in the wilderness with bread from heaven. It is a sign that he is the one, the prophet who is coming, because of all these connections with Moses. The spirit of this story, then, is laughter, joy, and wonder.

The walking on the water episode is a further development of the Exodus motifs in the feeding story. In the story of the Exodus, the people walk through the sea in order to escape from Egypt. In this story, the disciples are caught in a storm out on the sea and Jesus comes to them walking on the water. The word that he says is literally "I am," the same word that God says to Moses at the burning bush. "I am" is the divine name. So Jesus here acts like God. He walks on the water just as the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation. He demonstrates his power and authority over the powers of chaos.

In these two stories Jesus is both a prophet like Moses and the one who is in a very real way the presence of God. This story can be told both with a sense of awe and wonder, but also of delight as the disciples experience who Jesus is.