

John 6:1-21
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“Miracles and Meaning”

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The reading from John’s gospel tells of 2 of Jesus’ miracles. So, I thought we might have a little fun with miracle stories this morning. There is something we might call a miracle happened at Emanuel this week. Actually, many of them, but there was a string of events one morning which averted a potential disaster that I want to tell you about. This week was Vacation Bible School and the theme was “God is our Anchor.”

The teachers made good use of the theme. The children made fish shaped name tags. One night the dinner included fish sticks and another night they had Sub sandwiches, get it? The Bible stories included Jonah and the big fish, Jesus teaching his followers to be fishers of all people and more. New this year, the Board of Christian Education added a fourth night to VBS on Thursday and invited the students and families to see what they had been learning this week.

You can see the theme was reinforced in a fun and faithful way. But Tuesday morning there was a specific string of events I am calling a miracle... Early Tuesday morning, I sat on my front porch watching a fun morning show on Telemundo, a Spanish language channel. I only understand a little of the language, but many of the segments are fun and lighthearted. It is a good break from the news. One thing I did understand in the show was a news item announcing a recall of Goldfish crackers due to a salmonella outbreak. Of course, I did not think much about it.

Later Tuesday morning I arrived at Church and was beginning to work on the Children’s sermon for Sunday, the bible story was of course our assigned story of the boy offering his fish and bread to help Jesus and the disciples feed more than 5000 hungry people. I knew the VBS theme had been “God is our Anchor” so I wondered if I might be able to link the children’s time in worship today with the VBS theme. Karin graciously shared the daily plans for VBS with me, and as I reviewed them I noticed one night the lesson plan included using goldfish crackers as part of a project, a bell went off and I remembered the news item from my morning show... I told Karin I had seen there was a recall of these crackers; she quickly googled it and reputable news sources confirmed that there was a recall of these crackers due to a salmonella outbreak. The VBS leaders promptly made other plans for that project and averted a possible disaster. That is a complicated string of events that I’m calling a small miracle.

But, many of us are naturally skeptical of miracles. Our minds like to work on facts, and rules, and we want to follow laws of science and nature. So, when we have miracles stories in the bible it is common for people outside and inside the church to ask, “Do I have to believe this story which makes no common sense and seems more like magic or trickery, instead of any real kind of faith?”

The stories of feeding the 5000, and of Jesus walking on water appear in all four gospels. In

John's gospel, written 3 generations after Matthew, Mark and Luke; the author positions this story to teach about Who Jesus is... Jesus is the logos, the "Word" of God. He is not the letter of the Word; instead, he embodies the living word and we come to know God through Jesus' words and deeds.

This miracle of feeding, for the purpose of John's gospel, the focus isn't on the little bit of food leading to abundant leftovers—the focus in today's story is on Jesus himself, how a human being could, through his words and deeds, represent God so clearly and become such a powerful sign of hope and healing to the outcast and marginalized of the world that people would follow him anywhere he went and feel their hunger for the "bread of life" satisfied, and by extension, many of their other hungers filled.

Again, if we look through the lens of the author's theme that Jesus is the Word and "the Word became flesh and dwells among us;" what if the miracle is not that Jesus walked on the water as much as that Jesus's presence among ordinary, timid, insecure followers could calm their anxieties so much they find themselves with courage to step out of the boat, even into the storms raging in themselves and the world.

In fact we can look at Christ's resurrection similarly, what if, what is so genuinely miraculous about the resurrection is not simply that a dead body come to life, that happened other times in antiquity; but, through our journey with the crucified and risen savior the community who follows him then and now is able to find hope on the far side of despair, faith that lives with trust, and courage to teach the faith beyond the sting of death. This is what the ancient crowds found in Jesus and this is what we find today in the living Christ.

Parker Palmer, a wonderful Christian author says, "Truth is not a concept that "works" but an incarnation that lives." With Jesus we find a community formed where "leftovers," both food and people are treated as significant and worthwhile, where outcasts and marginalized and oppressed are deeply loved and treasured, along with everyone.

With Jesus we are the timid, fearful, insecure disciples empowered to enter the stormy waters surrounding us, and we learn that even we sink or fail, Jesus is there to lift us up.

So, in closing, do you believe in miracles? Let me ask that question a couple different ways... How have you been fed by God's surprising Grace? How has Jesus empowered you to respond to the storms of life which are raging? If our answer is Yes, or maybe, or even I think so? How might God be calling us to respond.

Amen