

3.19.2023 Lent 4 (John 6:1-14)

On Ash Wednesday, we began a 40-day journey in which we walk with our Savior Christ on the road to Calvary. Our desire in this season, which is often expressed through the lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer, and alms-giving, is more intimate fellowship with our Lord, a closer walk with God as we travel through the wilderness of this world. During Lent we fast, we give up that which is good, in order that we may take hold of what is best. We pray, we pray fervently for an encounter with Christ so transforming that *“it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”* (Galatians 2:20). During Lent we give, we reach out with renewed compassion for the hurting, the hungry, and those in need in order that we may learn to love like Christ, who sacrificially poured Himself out completely and unconditionally for every one of us.

Lent is a difficult 40-day journey in which we walk with our Lord to Calvary, and as we consider our Gospel reading this morning, the story of how Jesus miraculously fed thousands who left the selfish desires and demands of daily life behind in order to walk with Him, we are reminded during our own sacrificial journey, of how God nourishes and strengthens His people as we walk with Him.

The feeding of the 5,000 is a miracle that is found in each of the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all testify to the significance of this moment in our Lord’s ministry, and John, whose words we read today, provides us with a vivid illustration of this event which includes details that help us interpret the meaning of this miraculous sign. The first detail we find in John’s description is the location where Jesus performed this miracle. John tells us that *“Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His miracles which He did on them that were diseased. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there He sat with His disciples”* (John 6:1-3).

At the outset, St. John wants us to have this picture in mind of our Lord going *up into a mountain*, and there sitting with His disciples. The language John uses here reminds us of the way Matthew began the Sermon on the Mount. He wrote, *“And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain, and when*

He was seated His disciples came to Him” (Matthew 5:1). This mountaintop imagery is important to recognize because throughout the Bible the mountain is often where God meets with His people. When the floodwaters subsided, Noah’s ark came to rest on the “*mountains of Ararat,*” and when Noah offered a sacrifice there, Almighty God made a new covenant with His creation, promising to never again bring such destruction upon the earth (Genesis 8). Generations later, it was Abraham who climbed Mount Moriah with his son Isaac, and God was there to provide a ram as a sacrifice in the place of Abraham’s son (Genesis 22). On Mount Moriah, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3), and on Mount Sinai gave him the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19). Our Lord was transfigured in front of Peter, James, and John “*on a high mountain*” (Matthew 17:1), laid down His life for us all on a hill called Calvary (Mark 15:22-25), and ascended to heaven in the presence of His disciples on the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-12).

When St. John wrote, “*And Jesus went up into a mountain,*” he certainly had these images in mind of God reaching out to His people in high places, meeting with them there to work in miraculous ways that only He can. This mountaintop detail that John includes points to Jesus’ identity not as a miracle worker, but as God in human flesh, and the record of historic miracles God has performed in these high, thin places where heaven and earth meet, sets a tone of great expectation as the story unfolds.

The first detail St. John provides us with is a picture of God meeting His people on a mountain, and the next detail he offers to help us interpret the meaning of this sign is the time this miracle occurred. John tells us that it was nearly time for the Feast of Passover. He wrote, “*And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh*” (John 6:4), and writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, St. John includes this detail not merely as a way to record the time this event occurred, but as a way to draw a parallel between the Feast of Passover, and the feast that God, in the Person of Jesus Christ provided for the crowd who followed Him.

The Passover and the Feeding of the 5,000 both took place on this earth, but they were so much more than an earthly meal. These were miraculous, heavenly feasts. The Passover marked the way God, through a series of plagues, “*by the power of His mighty hand*” (Exodus 13:3), set His people

free from slavery in Egypt. The food of the Passover meal was the flesh of the sacrificial lamb. The people of God ate the flesh of the sacrificial lamb, and the lamb's blood was used to mark the top and sides of the Israelite doorframes. The flesh and blood of the lamb set the people of God apart, the angel of death passed over them, and so began the Exodus to the Promised Land.

Here's the parallel: At the Feeding of the 5,000, when Jesus was on the mountain with His disciples at the time of Passover, He knew that God was preparing another Lamb for sacrifice, and one year later, again at the time of Passover, "*The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29), would lay down His life as a sacrifice not to free a particular people from slavery in Egypt, but deliver His people (all who call upon His name) from slavery to sin and death. On a high place, a hill called Calvary, heaven and earth would meet, and God would "*draw all people*" to Himself (John 12:32). Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Male and female. God so loved the world! From the Cross our Savior would gaze out on a mixed multitude: Roman soldiers, Jewish religious leaders, crucified criminals, the women who accompanied Him, His blessed mother, the beloved disciple, and according to St. Luke "*all those who knew Him... stood at a distance, watching these things*" (Luke 23:49). On a mountain, at the time of Passover, they *stood at a distance* watching the redemption of the world, the moment when Christ our passover was sacrificed for us, and to use the words of St. Paul, when we "*keep the feast*" (1 Corinthians 5:8), the feast of Holy Communion, the flesh and blood of the Lamb sets us apart, we pass from death to life, and follow Jesus (the new Moses) on the Exodus to the Promised Land.

By including these details, St. John wants us to understand that the miracle Christ performed when He fed the 5,000 was not simply a provision of ordinary food. This miracle God performed was a sign, and the bread He gave them was a type, or shadow, of the Bread of Life He provides for us in Holy Communion. In fact, our Lord's Bread of Life discourse, His well-known teaching about receiving His Body and Blood, begins immediately after the Feeding of the 5,000 in this Gospel, drawing another direct connection between this miraculous feast and the Heavenly Bread of which we partake in Holy Communion.

God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, miraculously fed thousands who left the selfish desires and demands of daily life behind in order to walk with Him, and in this season of Lent, as we strive to set aside our own selfish desires and foolish demands, it is through the sacrament of Holy Communion that our Lord nourishes and strengthens us in this journey toward greater intimacy with Him. St. John shares the details of this miraculous story in order that we may be reminded of God's desire to commune with His people in high, thin places - on the mountain, or at the altar. He shares these details that we may keep the feast of Holy Communion, the Christian Passover meal of His own Body and Blood, a meal that sets us apart, a meal of new and eternal life in Christ. St. John shares these details that we may humbly receive "*the living Bread that came down from heaven*" (John 6:51), our Savior Christ, the Bread that not only gives us life today, but forever.