

“Bread in the Wilderness”

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St. Matthew 14:13-21

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What has just preceded the feeding of the 5,000 in Matthew’s Gospel – our text for today – was the story of a different feast, a different crowd, and a grisly death.

Herod, you recall, had John the Baptist arrested and thrown into prison because John had condemned Herod for marrying his brother’s wife, Herodias. Herodias was upset about John’s public condemnation of the marriage. But the crowds considered John to be a prophet, and Herod didn’t want to go against them. So when it was Herod’s birthday and a big feast was planned, all of Herod’s courtiers, officers and leaders of Galilee attended.

Then the daughter of Herodias, Salome – though her name is not mentioned in the text – danced before Herod. He was captivated and promised to give her anything she wanted. When she asked her mother what she should request, Herodias quickly responded: **“The head of John the baptizer.”** And her request was granted. John’s disciples retrieved the body and buried it and then told Jesus what had happened. And that brings us to our text:

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” Jesus is grief-stricken when he learns of John’s death and withdraws to an area of wilderness. Wilderness is a key term in the Scriptures. Wilderness is where John the Baptist preached. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism to fast and be tested for 40 days by Satan. The children of Israel wandered 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

Wilderness. We can understand what that is beyond its literal meaning. And I daresay we’ve all had the experience of wilderness in our lives – when we’ve felt alone, abandoned, grief-stricken, heart-sick; spiritually parched and emotionally drained. It can be a lonely and sometimes frightening place. Wilderness time can last 40 years, 40 days, or it can be even shorter, but as the Scriptures remind us, God is not absent even in the wilderness. In fact, wilderness can be a place of spiritual intensity where we draw even closer to our Lord.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ time in the wilderness is cut short not by his own choosing, but by the crowds who follow him there. The text tells us that he **“had**

compassion for them and cured their sick.” They were hungry for something and had to see whether he could satisfy that hunger.

As evening drew near, Jesus’ disciples began to worry about the crowd. Far from home and in a desolate place, they were bound to be hungry. **“Send them away,”** the disciples urge Jesus, **“so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”** But Jesus will not hear of it. **“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”** The disciples clearly thought they couldn’t do anything about the crowd’s hunger. **“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish,”** they tell Jesus. But Jesus will show them what he can do with even that measly amount of food.

He blessed the five loaves and two fish and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. And the result? Everyone ate and was filled AND there were 12 baskets of leftovers. So is the point of the story: Share what little you have and it will make a big difference in the lives of others? There’s no denying we are called to offer what we have to those in need. It’s true that each person’s contribution – when bundled together with all the other contributions – can change lives for the better. But the Gospel is not laying out a blueprint for material distribution and hunger elimination. Jesus will not allow the crowds to turn him into a bread king.

The people will go back to their villages and will be hungry again. The fish and loaves will last for a day or so, but no longer. What the crowd found in the wilderness is greater than mere sustenance. What they encountered – WHO they encountered – was the living bread of life, Jesus the Christ. As Jesus says in John’s Gospel: **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.” (John 6:51)**

The Living Bread from heaven **or** a bread king: Which is he in your life? Is our Lord merely a dispenser of good things, or is he the source of life and salvation? It seems that countless people believe that Jesus’ primary work is to provide the blessings of food, material wealth, and good health. That’s the message of the prosperity gospel proclaimed by health and wealth preachers. Faith is all about getting good things from God, they say. And then when problems arise that are overwhelming or disaster strikes that is devastating, God is said to be either absent and uncaring, or else faith wasn’t strong enough. “And I’m stuck in this wilderness of despair,” say those who expected the bread king to serve up ease and tranquility in their lives. Yes, there are those who truly want a bread king.

In Dostoevsky's novel "The Brothers Karamazov," there's a thought-provoking parable called "The Grand Inquisitor" – one of the best-known passages in modern literature – in which Christ comes back to earth at the time of the Inquisition in Spain. When he performs a number of miracles, the people recognize him and adore him, but he is immediately arrested by Inquisition leaders. The Grand Inquisitor, who visits Jesus in his cell, frames his prosecution of Jesus around the three temptations Satan offered Jesus – turn stones into bread; throw yourself off the temple wall; worship Satan and thereby rule the world.

At one point the Grand Inquisitor explains why turning stones into bread is so tempting: "**Turn them into bread,**" says the devil, "**and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient.**" It is the Inquisitor's contention, in agreement with the devil, that if people are promised bread, they will be willing to become slaves. Most people don't want freedom, says the Inquisitor. They want a God who will make life easy and non-threatening, who will feed their surface hunger. They're not strong or clever enough to know what to do with freedom. Give them a bread king and they'll be content.

But what today's text is telling us is that our Lord Jesus is offering something far greater and more lasting than bread. His disciples will help with feeding the hungry – just as you and I are called to do. But Jesus will also provide them bread that can never be taken away. He will give them himself, his own body, on the cross. And then he will say to all who have ears to hear: **"Take up your cross and follow me. And I will give you the crown of life."**

Jesus went into the wilderness – has come into our wilderness – in order through his death and resurrection he could lead us out into a new day. That day dawned in your and my baptism. You and I have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. God's promise to us is that we have a place at his table where there will be no hunger, no thirst, no tears, no death, but joy forevermore.

As his followers, we are called to share that good news – and bread – with those who struggle in their wildernesses – those who hunger for sustenance and those who hunger for the bread of life. And as we bear our crosses, whatever they may be, however bleak the moment may seem, we are assured that our Lord is right there with us – never forsaking us, never abandoning us in the wilderness. He will feed us; He will sustain us; and we will receive the crown of life!

Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us the victory!