

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

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The Wonder of God's Presence

Today we embark on a month's long journey into the Gospel of John where we are invited to dwell in the mystery of God's love for the world. This divine love is made known to us through the most basic and common element – bread. In the miraculous feeding of the five thousand we witness the human hungering for hope and the courage to believe that there is more to this life we share than scarcity, injustice and despair. The fact that this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels says something about the story's incredible power to impact people's lives for the last two thousand years. We are also witnesses to the miracle of Jesus walking on water as the panicked disciples are being tossed to and fro in their tiny boat by an angry sea.

Fact, fiction or fairy tales? What are to make of these miracles? Are we to believe that Jesus literally took the five barely loaves and two fish the young boy offered him and somehow was able to feed thousands of hungry people with enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets to the brim? How can we take seriously the seemingly preposterous idea of Jesus walking on water? In our post-modern, post-Christendom world we place utmost confidence in reason, fact-checking, data bases and scientific empirical proof. When anyone talks of miracles, especially those found in the Bible, the cynics and super rationalists write off these events like some type of magic trick, assuming it all a bit silly, or even child-like.¹ In response, it is tempting to try to explain away these "miracles" with logical, reasonable explanations as to what most likely occurred.

Did the crowds see the boy offer to share his meager brown bag lunch of bread and fish and, in response, they felt compelled to do the same – to take out their own brown bag lunches they had packed away and share it with those sitting close by. They all simply shared what they had brought with them and all were fed. Did Jesus really walk on water or was he simply walking so close to the shore line that from the view of the boat it looked like he was walking on water? Simple, rational explanations - end of story.

However, that is not the end of the story. In fact, it was only the beginning. And, this is the point. The thousands that are fed do not simply go back home, full and satisfied, and get on with their lives. They continue to follow Jesus because what they experience on that grassy knoll is more than a mere picnic in the park. In some mysterious way that is beyond any rational explanation Jesus gives them the hope to believe that life can be better; that love and justice ultimately prevails. Jesus sees their hunger and out of his compassion he feeds them. He shows them that their lives truly matter. He reveals God's love for them by feeding their empty bellies

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 284-288.

as well as their hungry souls. God's love becomes incarnate, tangible, and visible in Jesus' most humble offerings of bread and fish.

The sight of Jesus walking on water is not nearly as miraculous as is his grace-filled, comforting presence in the midst of a raging storm. Jesus comes to them through the turbulent waters to reassure and calm their fear and anxiety, "It is I. Do not be afraid" (v. 20). In time this transforming experience will enable the disciples to have the courage to venture out and walk on the rough seas of their own lives and be a calming, reassuring presence to others.²

These are the true miracles that our post-modern eyes often fail to see; the mystery and wonder of how God uses the most ordinary things and events in our lives to do such extraordinary things. We witness lives being transformed by Jesus' loving and compassionate presence, feeding those who are hungry and reassuring those who are frightened and anxious. Scarcity has been replaced with an over whelming abundance; despair and fear have been transformed into the courage to hope and to believe in the power of love even with all our doubts and uncertainties. This is what Paul speaks to in his letter to the Ephesians, "by the power of God at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

One of the real challenges for us today is whether we are able to put aside our 21st century demand to know "just the facts, please." Are we willing to let go of our need for certainty which is often the antithesis of faith because it leaves no room for wonder and curiosity? In these extremely polarized and intolerant times we live in there is a need more than ever for us to rediscover our capacity to wonder. Do we really have to have an explanation or answer for everything? This is a burden we can easily lay down. When we do we are open to reclaim that innocent sense of wonder of how God is fully present in this world and in the most intimate places of our lives, feeding us and reassuring us.

I see this wonder and awe in the eyes of my three month old grandson, Jackson. With his bright eyes wide open he is taking in the world for the first time with such pure joy and delight, it is infectious. Spending time with these sacred stories can help us rediscover and experience the true wonder and awe of God's presence in our world and in every moment of our life. The English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, captures this sense of wonder beautifully:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
And only he who sees takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.³

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

May you see the wonder of God's presence in the world and in your life this day and always.

Amen.

² Hall, Id.

³ Hall, Id.