

Jesus - Feeds 5000 / Walks On Water

In the vocabulary of many, these are the 4th & 5th miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John. In other translations, and according to biblical scholars like Raymond E. Brown, they are called signs. A lot of people think of the particular verses that record the signs and do not always connect them, especially in the Gospel of John, with the whole of the content that place these signs in the life of Jesus.

As we noted in the first three signs, they were used to situate Jesus in a context with people to whom he was ministering and to enable us to fully sense the interaction of what they heard and saw in concert with the words and actions of Jesus. These two signs appear in Chapter 6 of this Gospel and, as you will see, focus our attention on the life of Jesus as it relates to the celebration of Passover. Many people are not aware that Jesus was a faithful Jew and even many Christians forget that he was a Rabbi. As a devout Jew and Rabbi who kept the holy feasts of remembrance in Jerusalem, even as a child, Jesus was thoroughly familiar with the Law and the Prophets. The primary focus of the Gospel of John is to introduce us to Jesus so that we too can believe and experience the life he brought to us from God. These signs then are no more important than the whole of the context in which they occur. To make them more than they are is to distort the full impact of the ministry of Jesus to them and to us today.

In his well known and respected commentary on the Gospel of John, Raymond Brown gives us an outline of the progression of events in Chapter Six to present Jesus and his connection to the celebration of Passover. I will use this to facilitate my comments in sharing my story of how I see Jesus, and his relationship to us, in this twenty-first Century.

Chapter 6 - Jesus at Passover (Jesus gives bread replacing the manna of the Exodus)

- vs 1-15 - The multiplication of the loaves
- vs 16-21 - Walking on the Sea of Galilee
- vs 22-24 - Transition to the Bread of Life Discourse - crowd comes to Jesus
- vs 25-71 - Discourse on the Bread of Life, explaining the multiplication
 - vs 25-34 - Preface - Request for bread/manna
 - vs 35-50 - The Bread of Life is primarily Jesus' revelation; secondary eucharistic undertones
 - vs 51-58 - Duplicate of the Discourse - The Bread of Life is Eucharist
 - vs 59 - Geographical note on the setting of the Discourse
 - vs 60-71 - Epilogue - Reaction to the Discourse

I hope you will go to your favorite translation of the Bible and read the whole of Chapter 6: 1-71 before you continue. This whole chapter is about what John wishes us to know about Jesus and how this author saw him in relationship to this important celebration of Passover that continues today. The outline above may help you organize your thoughts and impressions that we will use to share this together.

As we begin the chapter you will notice that this 'sign' of feeding the multitudes came about out of a need for Jesus to show hospitality to the many people who were following him. They clearly appreciated and were impressed by what Jesus was doing among them and they longed for more. In addition, as we are told in verse 4, it was also near the great Jewish Festival of Passover wherein God helped the children of Israel escape slavery by delivering ten plagues to Egypt. The tenth and the worst of the plagues was the slaughter of the first-born of the Egyptian families. The Israelites were instructed to mark their doorposts with blood from the lamb they were to eat quickly before they left. It is said that they left in such a hurry that there was no time for the bread dough to rise. In future commemorations unleavened bread, Matzo, was used as a symbol of the holiday. Then, in verse five, we see Jesus looking around at the great crowd gathering which gave him the idea to ask Philip where they could obtain enough bread for the people. Discussing the difficulty of doing that, the disciples also notice that there was a boy there with five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus then takes over and, using these simple gifts of the lad's lunch, he gives thanks and distributed the boy's lunch to feed well over five

thousand people who were present. In addition, when all finished eating, the disciples collected twelve baskets of food left over so that none would be wasted. Jesus, even in this chapter, is seen as hospitable and ecological.

Let me stop here for a moment and say a few things about this sign that the people saw and consumed. It was inexplicable then and, to many today, it makes no sense. I do not wish to explain anything but to point out what happened in the process.

- There was a large crowd gathering as they were following Jesus and his disciples
- Jesus, who loved to teach, saw this as a great moment to give a visual teaching about the Passover
- Jesus, who perhaps was getting hungry, desired to show his caring hospitality and concern for the people's needs as well
- Since there were no supermarkets or catering services nearby, something had to be done
- Often, things at hand are a great asset for possibilities
- Giving thanks, gratitude, is the resource - a source of aid or support that may be drawn upon when needed
- Never wasting any blessings or gifts that come from God is prudent

Have you not seen God present in your circumstance in life today? I have and I have heard the witness of countless others who have happenings that are also unbelievable or hard to explain. I am not trying to diminish what happened here in the feeding of more than five thousand people, but I have experienced and know the drama of God's presence in my lifetime along with others. The 'signs' of God's love and grace are all around us so I have no problem with this amazing gift from God in the time of Jesus. Here are some thoughts about that from my experience and others.

- There have been times of extreme circumstances, good and bad, that loomed large
- Looking back on these was the experience of great lessons of God's grace
- They encourage and enable many of us to engage in hospitality and caring for others
- Resources for such circumstances are often, even in these progressive times, not available
- Being open to new dreams and ideas can, and often do, bring amazing opportunities and solutions
- Frugality often brings greater resources for even more unexpected gifts

Example: I was sent to Trinity Parish in Bayonne in 1974 to close a parish because the church burned and only a few members were left. The Diocese and the people had no resources at hand to rebuild. Result: Miraculously, thirty four years later, when I had to retire as the rector because of my age, the parish was totally rebuilt with a mission in the community called Windmill Alliance Inc. This ministry continues to serve disabled and autistic adults along with others in need with over 30 full time staff and a budget of almost two million dollars. Many people expressed, throughout the years, that it could not happen and no one can really explain how it still continues.

Our story in chapter six continues, in verse fourteen, with total amazement of the people who watch and experience this 'sign' presented by Jesus. The people, we are told, started to rally around Jesus, whom they called a prophet, to "seize him to proclaim him king". With this Jesus withdrew to the hills by himself.

From here, the second 'sign' recorded in this chapter began to develop. It is placed in between two places where people gathered in two towns along the banks of the Sea of Galilee, from Tiberias to Capernaum, about seven miles apart near the shore. Jesus had withdrawn himself from the crowd to avoid seizure and the disciples went down towards evening to the sea to set off by boat. In this transition it was dark and the disciples were about three or four miles along toward Capernaum. In the midst of the wind and rough sea they saw Jesus walking on the sea and approaching the boat and we are told that they were terrified. Jesus says, "It is I, do not be afraid". Then, as this story continues, it appears to me that another additional miracle is noted because, "as they were ready to take him on board, and immediately the boat reached the land they were making for". Since the boat was only half the distance between their destination, does this mean that the boat immediately reached the shore about another three or four miles away? Is this transitional scene simply an interesting part in how Jesus and the disciples moved to another location?

I will not dwell on verses 16 through 21 and discuss them further except to point out that scholars site a variety of differences from other versions of this scene that also appears in the synoptic Gospels of Mark and Matthew. The stories are similar but not the same. Because of the dating order of these three Gospels, Mark being first, then Matthew, and finally John, their use of this story may have varied. While Raymond Brown says on page 254 in his commentary, *"We take for granted that the evangelist does intend to portray a miracle"* he also sites, page 253, that Chrysostom (In Jo. XLIII 1; PG 59:259) *"thought the Synoptics and John were describing different events!" "The element of the wonderful is more prominent in the Synoptic account, especially in Matthew"*. It seems that John is primarily using this story, taken from the Synoptics, mainly as a transitional explanation to move Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd to Capernaum.

In verse 22, the story now continues by telling us about the next morning and how the crowd moved to follow Jesus to Capernaum. They saw only one boat there and knew that Jesus did not leave by boat with his disciples. With other boats coming to shore at Tiberias the crowd embarked in these boats to search for Jesus and the disciples at Capernaum. When they arrive at the other side and see Jesus they asked him when he got there, making no reference to their awareness of anything unique or unusual, Jesus says nothing about boats or crossing. Jesus replied, *"In very truth I tell you, it is not because you saw signs that you came looking for me, but because you ate the bread and your hunger was satisfied. You would work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life."* Then Jesus begins to address the Passover and to explain more about himself as the Son of Man who has come to do the work of God and how and why they must believe in him.

The Passover - What's the Story?

A Summary from the Hebrew Scriptures:

Together with Shavuot ("Pentecost") and Sukkot ("Tabernacles"), Passover is one of the three pilgrimage festivals (Shalosh Regalim) during which the entire Jewish populace historically made a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans still make this pilgrimage to Mount Gerizim, but only men participate in public worship.

In the narrative of the Exodus, the Bible tells that God helped the Children of Israel escape slavery in Egypt by inflicting ten plagues upon the Egyptians before Pharaoh would release his Israelite slaves; the tenth and worst of the plagues was the slaughter of the first-born. The Israelites were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spring lamb and, upon seeing this, the spirit of the Lord passed over these homes, an easy way to remember the holiday. There is some debate over where the term is actually derived from. When Pharaoh freed the Israelites, it is said that they left in such a hurry that they could not wait for bread dough to rise (leaven). In commemoration, for the duration of Passover no leavened bread is eaten, for which reason it is called "The Festival of the Unleavened Bread". Matzo (flat unleavened bread) is a symbol of the holiday.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover>

As our text continues in Chapter 6:

From verse 22 to the end of this chapter, Jesus tries to explain what the Passover means and how it fits into his introduction about the Realm of God that is now present in this world. In verse 27 Jesus tells the crowd that followed him to Capernaum, *"You should work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life"*. The feeding of the 5000 was a vision of the life that is really basic to the more important nourishment of "eternal life". He wanted them to know that there was much more to God's gift of life and living than the outward and visible that is obvious and of great concern for people everywhere. To only know this temporal portion of life is to be like the Hebrews who were enslaved in Egypt and felt that pain of entrapment. Like so many today, they wanted and expected more, so they asked, *"What sign can you give us,*

so that we many see it and believe you? What is the work you are doing?" They realized Jesus was trying to tell them more when he used the example of their ancestors who were given manna to eat in the desert. Jesus reminds them that this bread was not given by Moses but by God himself, bread, as it were, from heaven. When they wanted this kind of bread too we are told, Jesus said to them, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But you, as I said, have seen and yet you do not believe."*

In the Gospel of John we see this statement over and over, "I AM". This is a phrase that must be understood if the reality presented in this Gospel is to become real in our everyday experience. At the opening on our website about the Gospel of John, I wrote a paper to explain this very important language because it is central to the life of Jesus and who he was, and, it is also his message to his disciples and those of us who would become his disciples even today. I invite you, before we go on, to take a look at this by going here: <http://janddhealth.com/GJIAM-YouAre.pdf>

As we move to the theme for the rest of chapter six about the Passover, the first two paragraphs of the paper cited above defines the basic literary style of the Gospel of John. The teaching style of Jesus is emulated by the author of this Gospel to enhance the authenticity of the rabbinical role of Jesus. Jesus often used parables and allegory, *"an expressive style that uses fictional characters and events to describe some subject by suggestive resemblances"*, as a teaching method. Very few people in this day were able to read or write so the use of metaphor, *"a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity"*, helped to clarify subjects that were not easy to comprehend.

The Passover is the story of "Freedom" and the real values and aspects of living that bring us this gift of freedom envisioned in the Realm of God. This concept was something that could be heard and seen in the words and life of Jesus. Freedom, according to the dictionary is, *"the condition of being free - immunity from an obligation or duty"*. Freedom from a lifestyle that is an enslavement or captivity! When anyone is enslaved or held captive to anything other than who they are or were meant to be is not a condition acceptable in the Realm of God. God not only created life but it is by God's Presence or Spirit, *"in whom we live and move and have our being"*, that life in all its abundance is made available to us.

Giving consideration to the rest of Chapter six, verses 30-71, is not made easy according to many of the scholars who give us pages and pages of explanation and comment. Since I do not claim to be one of those scholars, let me share very simply what I sense is a summary of what the author of John was saying about Jesus and the Passover. There are two verses in this section that stand out for me in order to share my thoughts, (vs. 56) *"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him."* (vs. 63) *"It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh can achieve nothing; the words I have spoken to you are both spirit and life."*

While the Passover may have been an occasion in history, it has become much more in an on-going experience for all time. This experience of the power of God in the lives of people is celebrated every year in the Feast of Passover. It begins with a special meal and continues throughout the year in a way of living, especially among Jews. Many Jews who do not practice their religious faith regularly participate in this celebration with their families.

After the resurrection of Jesus the essence of this meal became the Eucharist for Christians. The first day of each week, Sunday, the day when Jesus was said to have been resurrected, became the primary day for celebration of the Eucharistic meal each week. The words in the Gospel of John and other Christian writings were remembered and acted out in the simple gifts of bread and wine. It is a spiritual meal that brings new life and meaning into the ordinary lives of Christians by connecting them to God who makes possible both spirit and life.

What is a meal? It is a time for the consumption of food for nourishment to stay alive! It can and should however be more than a physical experience. It can also be a time to experience the spirit of being who we are among family and friends and give us spirit and life for living. It becomes more than the consumption of the outward and visible food that provides the energy for a good life. It is a time of inward and spiritual blessing of being together with others. What would we really be if it were not for the people who nourish and support us every day? The actuality of interdependence in body, mind, and spirit is all a part of the essence of what makes a life of freedom and abundance.

These were hard words, we are told, for the majority of the people gathered around Jesus in this chapter. These words were taken so literally, spoken by the man they knew and saw among them, that most were unable to understand the metaphor of God's eternal provision and care they just witnessed. Even though many felt they were part of a miracle in the feeding of so a large crowd, it was difficult for most to catch the spiritual side of what had happened. John tells us, that the majority of those present, were turning away because they could not understand why Jesus asked them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We are even told, at the end of this chapter, that the disciples were having a hard time with these words of Jesus as well. When Jesus asks his disciples if they were about to leave as well, *"Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life.'" Only they seemed to be able to understand the "inward and invisible grace" of the "outward and visible signs" that were being shared.*

Even today these words seem to cause more argument and confusion instead of leading us to the essential interdependence with God and others to "consume" and be "consumed" by God. Life, in parable or metaphor, is a holy "meal". To not understand and participate in this holy process we will, more probably than not, be "consumed" by words and deeds that will enslave and hold us in captivity. If we continue to argue and try to explain or understand this mystery of life in a literal way we are doomed. Because it is almost impossible to grasp the full meaning of life, the totality of life, the interdependence of the outward and visible with the inward and invisible, we need to accept the parableness and metaphoricalness of life in all its fullness. The power of faith does not exist in codes and laws but in a meal or communion with God and one another.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.