



Sermon Series John 6

1: Understanding the Narrative: 1-15, 22-35

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

This week, we joyfully return to worship together, after two weeks of lockdown and Zoom worship. It's such a blessing to see you all. I do find lockdown something of a trial even though by nature I am somewhat introverted. As humans, we are creatures who seek connection, with each other, with God and even with our own selves. So lockdowns, while they can be opportunities for deep reflection, can also take away the opportunities and joy we have, for and in connection with each other.

So it's quite timely that today, we are starting a four week sermon series exploring chapter six of John's Gospel. I hope you had some time to look at it this week. It's quite possibly the most famous and infamous section of John's Gospel. It has something for everyone. If you like drama, it has miracles; if you like narrative, it has the story of Jesus' ministry in his homeland in northern Galilee, if you like theology, chapter six gives us Jesus' Bread of Life reflection. The chapter in its entirety lays the foundation for our sacramental thanksgiving, the eucharist, the holy communion, the greatest liturgical symbol of the connection that we seek and have with God. So today, I want to start exploring this chapter by looking at the narrative, the story line that John presents to us, and this will lead us, into the identity of Jesus and the Bread of Life reflection.

The narrative or storyline in chapter 6 takes up the first half of the chapter. In this section, the Gospel writer leads us through two miracles or "signs" as John refers to them. We heard them last week in our reading of the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on water. They're well-known stories, also

repeated in the other Gospels. In fact, in Mark's gospel, the feeding story is told twice. Given the repetition across the Gospels, it must be important and have special significance. The next segment of chapter 6, which we have just listened to today, continues the story of the followers, the group who were fed the day before and their pursuit of Jesus because they believe him to be the next prophet. The discussion that Jesus has with them in Capernaum, leads us to the punchline "I am the bread of life" from which follows the deep reflection about identity, sacrament and life, and we'll talk about these in coming weeks.

When I read these stories in John's Gospel, it always brings up images from my pilgrimage to Israel, just before my ordination three and a half years ago. We had three days touring around the Lake of Galilee and visited the ruins of Capernaum including the synagogue where Jesus taught. You can actually see the black, basalt rock foundation of the original synagogue, underneath the line of the broken, white limestone walls of a newer synagogue, built over the top. I was so fascinated by it that I took this picture which you can see on the powerpoint slide. We were literally standing inside the synagogue where Jesus gave this Bread of Life reflection. It was a surreal feeling as we explored the ruins of the place where Jesus preached, literally walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Earlier that day, we had celebrated the Eucharist in an outdoor setting, with a stone altar among olive trees overlooking the lake of Galilee, in another place that commemorates the Feeding of the 5000.

This pilgrimage experience certainly helps me envision Jesus in place. It gives me a sense of visual context, but it's also good to place this narrative in context with the whole Gospel of John, and also within the historical context of the Jewish people. Let's first look at the Gospel of John more broadly.

This Gospel writer calls miracles, “signs” and the use of language here is interesting. The other gospel writers call them miracles or deeds of power. John positions them as signs or works. What is a sign? It’s something that points us to somewhere else, to a deeper truth or meaning. At the end of John’s Gospel in chapter 20, the writer says:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

And this is what chapter 6 is about. The two miracles here point to the greater truths about Jesus, his identity and his relationship with God the Creator, the God of the Jews. And John uses this word “sign” in the narrative today when the crowd asks Jesus “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” I don’t know about you, but I can imagine Jesus wondering “what do I have to do for these people? I just fed them all miraculously with bread and fish yesterday!” However, it seems from the text that Jesus is much more patient with them!

But the crowd is insistent. They think they have found their man. And this is where the historical context is informative. We know from verse 4 of chapter 6 that the Passover was near. Passover is the greatest Jewish festival linked directly to its sense of national identity. It celebrates the emancipation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, led out by Moses, and was instituted during the wilderness period when the people were fed by manna or bread from heaven. And it is in this context, that the crowd sees in Jesus, the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy, the second Moses, the deliverer from the all-conquering Roman Empire. But Jesus rebuffs them, first in verses 14-15 when he withdraws from them because they were going to make him king after feeding them all with just five loaves and two fish, and

again in today's reading when they hunt him down in Capernaum. He has not come to be head of a revolutionary mob.

And this discussion that he has with the crowd shows that they are on very different wave lengths. Jesus points out to them in verse 26 "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." He is pointing out to them that they are not seeing the signs, the deeper truths. He is not here for earthly reasons to merely fill their bellies. He is not the king that they are seeking.

But they can't let go of this idea. They bring up Moses and the manna in the wilderness. And Jesus says "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Here Jesus tries to help them understand what the earlier signs mean. It is God who provides the true bread from heaven. And the bread from heaven gives life to the world. And out of this narrative, this story line, Jesus then says "I am the bread from heaven" leading us into one of the most profound reflections in the Gospels.

So this narrative, which includes miracles, story line and history, provides the backdrop for the reflection that we will hear next week. But for today, I wonder what its application could be for us? In our current circumstances, I couldn't go past the feeding in the wilderness motif. This week, we return to worship together after a period of wilderness and lock down. This brief period of wilderness that we have experienced this time, I think is located within a larger wilderness experience brought about by the Covid virus. Many of us haven't seen loved ones for over a year because of the various national and international restrictions that we have been facing over the last 18 months.

What has sustained you in your time of wilderness? What has been your bread from heaven? What has given you life?

For me the answer to these questions is love. I have felt your love as I have gone about my work, trying to minister with love from afar. I have also felt Jesus' love in my own times of quiet reflection. I have felt the love of this place, the comfortable vicarage, the blue stone steeple that I look out at from my bedroom, the You Yangs in the distance, even though I couldn't go there for a walk because it's 6 kilometers away! And I have felt the love of my personal network, friends and family and my beautiful dog who has a great capacity for love and affection. We have been fortunate here in Victoria this time and we can be thankful that our lockdown has been short.

So, it is with a sense of great joy and thankfulness that I return to worship here today and anticipate our joining together as the body of Christ, singing hymns of praise, hearing God's word, praying for God's people and receiving holy communion.

So, as we prepare for the Eucharist today, let's wonder at the bread of heaven and the love that Jesus pours out for each of us. I will always remember the hills around the lake of Galilee and its foreshore and imagine him teaching, healing and breaking bread with the people surrounding him. People like us, who were searching for something, perhaps a more fulfilled life, perhaps answers to big questions, or perhaps for a relationship with a living God. Let us remember him and meet him in Holy Communion.