

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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DEFINING THE MIRACLE

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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ISAIAH 55:1-5 | PSALM 145: 8-9, 15-22

ROMANS 9:1-5 | MATTHEW 14:13-21

We certainly can relate to this moment in Jesus' life. Following the great success of his unprecedented teaching mission, preaching to attentive crowds wherever he went, he needed a break. Also, when he went back home to Nazareth, nobody wanted to hear a word. And then the news came about John the Baptist's death reached him – the cynical, cruel, and careless execution of his mentor friend and mentor must have shook him to the core. He really needed to get away.

Maybe the final straw for me this week – week three of our heat wave wrapped in the pandemic? – was the news that hurricane season was already upon us, well before the end of July. I found myself typing into the google machine the phrase: “the worst era in history.”

I discovered a recent article in Science Magazine addressed it head on, entitled “Why 536 was ‘the worst year to be alive.’” Beginning in the year 536, a mysterious fog engulfed the known world. The sun did not shine for 18 months, and temperatures plummeted an

average of 35° for three years. Then a terrible plague and famine ripped through the Roman Empire from East to West, hastening its downfall.

Just recently, scientists have discovered some clues that might solve this famous mystery of history. Evidence high in the Swiss Alps reveals that there were several volcanic eruptions that year, spewing ash for thousands of miles across the known inhabited world. An environmental disaster. We worry about global warming. In 536, it turns out the catastrophe came in the form of a little ice age.

And even more. In the deepest parts of the Arabian desert, the change brought opportunity. A new world power emerged from the Arabian deserts not affected by the climate change. Peoples were conquered. Cities destroyed. Trade routes redirected. The rise of the prophet Mohamed and a new religion, a new way of being.

Think of it: darkness covers the land for months, temperatures plummet for years, droughts, floods, pestilence, wars, massive migrations, – you wake up one day to the effects of climate change and a new world order. But the worst is, you don't know why.

Jesus' has been doing such wonderful work. But who is really paying attention? Who is listening? No one will notice if he takes a little break. He gets in a boat and rows out to a lonely place.

But Jesus has the word, he is the word. Biblical promises have a way of sounding from the most deserted places, the most forsaken places:

“The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.

The Lord is loving to everyone *
and his compassion is over all his works.

The Lord upholds all those who fall; *
he lifts up those who are bowed down.

The eyes of all wait upon you, O Lord, *
and you give them their food in due season.

You open wide your hand *
and satisfy the needs of every living creature.”

Jesus senses that the crowds have followed him. He knows they have come for so many different reasons. After a good while, after thousands have made their way to the hillsides by the lake, he rows back to shore. He has already taught them like Moses, reinterpreting

the law. He has already taught them like Solomon, explaining the mysteries of the kingdom in parables. Maybe he realizes he must also teach them like the prophets of old, in a way that helps them see what God is like, see into God's intentions and heart. Like Elijah did. Like Elisha did.

As he rowed to shore, perhaps the words of Isaiah came to him:
“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.”

When Jesus landed, he walked through the whole crowd, touching them, being with them, healing them, doing what compassion does. So many people! What do they really need?

Do you remember the Millenium Development Goals of 20 years ago? How have we done with the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and opening up opportunity through expanding education and health care? Poverty has been cut in half. Hunger in many parts of the world is no longer an issue. Universal primary school, especially for women, is greatly increased. Most notably though, every goal that depends upon environmental improvement remains unfulfilled.

We see much the same dynamic in our own community. There is an extraordinary map of the city of Philadelphia, dotted block by block with hundreds of daily student lunch sites, that will keep thousands of young people fed this summer.

Philabundance and the City of Philadelphia work together to map and source these sites, along with an exhaustive list of food pantries and adult soup kitchens. I was grateful to see a picture of the promise that no one need go hungry in our city. Still, it is one thing to fill bellies; it is another to grow healthy limbs and nimble minds.

We are closer to the year 536 than we like to admit. We have not addressed the many issues of lower income communities who bear the greater burden of our environmental pollution and failures. Poor communities, communities of color, live with higher rates of toxic exposure, respiratory illness, diabetes, and cancer. We might be able to feed everyone, but still not address the environment that threatens them most. We may be full. But now we discover, we cannot breathe.

Jesus is not only looking at 10,000 on a hillside. He is looking right at us. When it says he had compassion on them, he turns from teaching to doing, and he draws us alongside. He does not just open his hand to feed the masses. Rather, he turns to his disciples and says “You give them something to eat.”

Only then are gifts identified, gathered together, blessed and broken. Each humble gift fills the frame. The story doesn't let us analyze the miracle. The abundance happens on both sides, the human and the divine, the giver and the receiver. It turns out that feeding the people is not the job of either the teacher or the healer. It is the job of the whole community.

Just this week, I was blessed to visit the beautiful new home of an after school program in Norristown. They won't be able to have classes inside this fall, but they looked around. They were given more than classroom and community space. There is a big side lawn. They have decided to focus on teaching the families to grow food together.

What if we were to look at that same map of our city, and instead of a colorful plot of points of distribution, each dot represented an anchor, a rooted place, fertile soil, a place where neighbors gathered to share their gifts and expertise. What if each dot represented a community garden?

This miracle on the hillside rightly points us to our weekly celebration of the Eucharist. God is always present, but especially so when we take our gifts, offer them to be multiplied, and share them, expecting a surplus.

Each week we are reminded that we will never have enough until we bless it and break it. And we will never have what we need until we have given it away.

As Jesus feeds us, he proves God's compassion. His greatest mercy is to invite us to do the same.

As Jesus commands us to participate with him in his miracle, we can deal with the worst year to be alive. More importantly, we are given the strength and vision to work and see that each dot on our community map can blossom into a community garden. Nothing happens this morning until we hear these words and respond: “You give them something to eat.”