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## “We Understand the Loaves and Fish.”

The people whom Jesus grew up with, and to whom he ministered, knew their Scripture like it was the back of their hand. And that’s because Scripture wasn’t just something to be honored and studied; it was also entertainment of the highest order; perhaps the only entertainment they had on a regular basis. And after a week of hard labor on the farm, or in the pastures, or in the shop, or what have you, to go to synagogue on the Sabbath and hear your rabbi read a story from Scripture, was to be transported to other times and places. And when your rabbi explained the stories, you then understood the world just a little bit better.

By contrast, your average twenty-first Christian is fairly ignorant of Scripture. I don’t say that with any judgment or condemnation; it’s just a fact. And part of the reason for that is because we have an abundance of sources for entertainment. And so it’s really no surprise that, after a long, hard day at work or school, we’d prefer to spend our free time doing something easy — like watching TV, or checking social media — rather than something challenging, like trying to understand passages from a

book that was written thousands of years ago, and for a completely different culture. So, I get it.

And so, that's why, when the average Christian today hears a story like the feeding of the five thousand, we might think, "Hey, that's pretty cool!" and leave it at that. But when a first-century Jew hears that same story, they're hearing and seeing all kinds of things that we just don't.

For example, in our gospel reading, when we're told that "Jesus went up the mountain," the first thing in my mind was an image of Jesus walking up a mountain. But a first-century Jew, hearing those same words, just might remember another story that described how Moses went up a mountain. And then, they'd remember that mountains were often special places, where important people went to talk to God. And then, they might even think, "Hey, this Jesus kind of reminds me of Moses. Maybe, he's a type of new Moses. Huh!"

Or, when they heard how Jesus fed all those people, a first-century Jew might remember another story, about a time when God fed their ancestors in the wilderness. And they'd think, "Huh!"

God provided our ancestors with food. And now Jesus is providing us with food. I wonder if there's a connection.”

So, my point is that the average first-century Jew had an enormous advantage over your average twenty-first century Christian, when it came to understanding the depth and breadth of meaning contained in scripture. (And that's probably why people like me can still get a job.)

Now, you might have noticed that our gospel reading contains two stories. The first is the feeding of the five thousand. But it's the second story — the account of Jesus walking on water — that I want to focus on, because that second story helps us to understand the first.

Now, the first thing we need to keep in mind, is the fact that just about every miracle story in John's gospel served two purposes. First, the miracle being described was almost always similar to something that had happen in history. And, second, it assured people that some of the things that were true in the past, are still true today. So, now let's look at the story again.

Right after the miracle of the loaves and fish — that is, after Jesus fed the five thousand people — Jesus sends the disciples away, he dismisses the crowd, and goes off by himself to pray.

Now, it's usually the case that, when Jesus goes off to pray, it's at a time of great crisis. And the crisis in our gospel reading, had to do with the fact that no one seems to have understood the deeper meaning of what Jesus had just done, by feeding all those people. And we know that, because the crowd's response to being fed was to try to force Jesus to be their king. And that's the last thing he needs. And so, after spending some time in prayer, Jesus apparently comes to the decision that the best solution to that particular crisis, was to simply walk away from it, so he heads off to rejoin the disciples.

Then comes the whole walking on water miracle, and it's absolutely jam-packed with biblical images that point to the power of God. So, to really appreciate the story of Jesus walking on the water, we need to remember also:

the story of how God calmed the waters of  
chaos to create the world;

and the story of how Moses separated the waters of the Red Sea to create the people of Israel;

and the stories of how Joshua and Elijah separated the waters of the Jordan River, to possess and to renew the Promised Land.

All of these stories — stories about the power of God to control even the seas — is context for the story of Jesus walking on water. Because, when Jesus goes to his disciples, by doing what God did at the creation — by overcoming the power of the sea — he was showing them that, in him, was the full power and authority of God.

But the disciples are busy rowing the boat when they catch sight of Jesus, and their first reaction is to be terrified; because they were sure that Jesus was somewhere else — off praying, or being made king, or some such thing. So they are surprised, and amazed, and utterly astounded, because they did not yet understand the meaning of the loaves and fish. And even though walking on water is pretty impressive stuff, that's not the most

important part of the story. What is even more amazing, and powerful, is the *message* that Jesus was trying to convey with his miracles; and that message was this:

What God has done in the past, God can still do in the present, and God will continue to do in the future.

Okay, fine. But why should that matter to us? Well, as we gather, week after week, to celebrate the Eucharist, and as we are sent out, week after week, to love and serve the Lord, we are being asked to remember and understand the meaning behind the miracle of the loaves and fish.

And to fully understand and appreciate the loaves and fish, means that we begin to realize, first and always, that Jesus is with us. It doesn't matter how bad the storm is, or how far our boat is from land, the loaves and fish tell us that, despite any possible evidence to the contrary, Jesus is still with us!

To understand the loaves and fish, means that we begin to realize that everything that Jesus gives to us — every free lunch we

receive on a hillside, every benefit of life, every blessing of whatever sort, indeed, everything that God offers to us — *all those gifts are signs* that point beyond themselves to the one great gift: The gift of God himself; the gift of a relationship with God.

And to accept only the gift, without trying to understand the message that is being conveyed by the gift, is to sacrifice something great for something that is merely good. And to want the gift so much, that we lose sight of the giver, is to condemn ourselves to a kind of spiritual poverty.

But at the same time, to understand the loaves and fish means that, like those disciples, God may send us places; that God may ask us to step away from the security of places familiar, and send us off in new directions; and often, to tasks that will have us straining at the oars; and even to places where God seems absent.

Finally, to understand the loaves and fish is to realize that what we do at this altar, is connected to the same majesty, the same love, and the same presence that the 5,000 people on that mountainside, and the 12 disciples in their boat, knew, and saw, and experienced. Because at our altar, God feeds us; and at the

very heart of that feeding, beyond the gift of bread and wine, is the gift of God himself. And that's a gift that's never withdrawn, never lost, never left behind, never overpowered, and never conquered.

To understand the loaves and fish is to realize that, whatever fears we may have, can be met by the love we are given from God. It is to realize that whatever powers rise against us, can and will be met by an ever greater power. And it's to realize that whatever journey we are on, will, by God's grace, end safely.

When the disciples in the boat saw that Jesus was with them, they were surprised, and they were frightened, because they didn't understand the loaves and fish. But we have been challenged to expect the Lord to be with us, no matter what, and from that to take heart; because, after all, we do now understand the meaning behind the loaves and fish.

Amen.