

Our gospel text begins with a reference. “When Jesus heard what had happened.” Right from the start, we know we don’t have all the information. We’re left wondering what happened? I couldn’t help but think of that part at the beginning of a television show when they summarize the previous episode. So here goes, my best attempt to summarize the events leading up to our gospel reading for today.

Previously on: the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod the Tetrarch. Herod was afraid of the crowd, but not as much as he was afraid of breaking his promise to his niece. So he agreed to kill John and serve up his head on a platter. Now that’s a feast fit for royalty! What will Jesus and his disciples do next? Let’s find out on the Gospel of Matthew.

So now we enter the text, and even though John doesn’t appear in this story, he’s very much in the background of the entire event. John was known for gathering the people, preaching the coming kingdom of God, and baptizing people, **inviting** them into new life in the kingdom.

John had baptized Jesus in the third chapter of Matthew's gospel, perhaps passing on the mantle to him before he was arrested. It is possible that some of Jesus's disciples were first disciples of John. So there's a relationship between Jesus and John that is in the background of this story.

At the beginning of our reading, Jesus hears the news of John's death from some of John's disciples. And it appears that the word has got around, because the crowds hear, too, and they go to find Jesus in a solitary place. The **hearing** is important here. The crowds are **hearing the same news that Jesus heard**. They are carrying the same burden, the same grief, the same fears.

We don't know exactly why Jesus withdrew to this place. Many have presumed to know what he needed: a time of prayer, a moment to be alone, the shelter of a place outside of government surveillance. Maybe he needed all of these things. The reality is that Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us.

But I wonder if the crowds were driven to this place by the same needs that brought Jesus there, as they traveled by foot to meet him. I wonder if they were driven by fears about the future after their teacher, their prophet, their pastor was killed. Could they have been looking for solace in another trusted leader?

When Jesus found the people there in the place that was meant to be solitary, he wasn't annoyed. He didn't turn his boat around. He had compassion on the people. The kind of compassion that aches from deep within, that shares the pain of the loss of a friend. Compassion that understands there is work to be done.

Often, the work of healing in this story is glossed over because of the miracle of feeding thousands. But verse 14 tells us that Jesus "had compassion on them and healed their sick". I wonder what this scene looked like. How Jesus spoke and cared for thousands of people to bring about healing. I wonder how he has spoken to you and cared for you in your lifetime. I wonder what healing you are longing for.

The people came to Jesus, longing. Hungering. In any story of healing, hunger is not far behind.

But hunger can feel threatening.

So the disciples are ready for the people to pack it up and move along. To head down to the towns and buy their own food. Were they thinking of hunger or something else?

Were they afraid to gather publicly with so many people after the murder of a prophet? Maybe it felt easier to just send everyone home, to call an end to the movement, to admit defeat? Maybe it was tempting to deny God's presence in their lives and choose safety and security.

Jesus had compassion on his disciples, too. He redirected fear into hope and asked them to feed the people. As he seated the crowd, the disciples told him what they had to offer: five loaves of bread and two fish. Perhaps it was the meal they had planned to share with Jesus alone that evening. But God had other plans.

Jesus looked at the crowd and said “They do not need to go away.” They can find everything they need right here. In the kingdom of heaven, there is enough.

When I was up at camp this past week, I was sitting by the fireplace with a few other people. One of them was going over a list of campers and carefully tallying each one to prepare for the meals for the week ahead. As she counted and double counted, she sighed with frustration that the numbers just weren’t adding up!

That’s kind of how I feel about this story. Five loaves and two fishes are **not going to cut it** when it comes to feeding five thousand men— and I guess the women and children should probably get to eat, too, right? I imagine the disciples counting and double counting as they try to make sense of what Jesus is asking them to do: give them something to eat.

Something. Anything. These are hungry people, and they need to eat.

Feeding people isn't always easy. There are things to keep in mind like numbers of people, allergies, dietary restrictions, cost. At camp, the children waited patiently at their tables to be called up by cabin. And sometime throughout the meal, a counselor would inevitably call them up for seconds, because food was always left over.

I wonder if Jesus and his disciples called for seconds with this crowd of thousands. If five loaves and two fishes could feed over five thousand, how many more could be fed with twelve basketfuls?

Generations of people have treasured and pondered this story over the centuries, sometimes marveling and sometimes scoffing at the miracle, wondering if miracles are still possible for us. It's a question I have struggled with as I try to make sense of the word miracle.

Miracles are often defined by their logic-defying nature. Miracles represent the impossible made possible. A sick person healed. Protection in a storm. The dead brought to life.

There's another feature of miracles. They are moments in time when we are heading in the same direction as God. Moments when we meet God, unexpectedly, in a remote place. Carrying a deep hunger that God alone can satisfy. The crowds came to meet Jesus. The disciples wanted to turn them away, but Jesus had room for them. And he helped his disciples make room for them, too. He surprised them with a miracle that was beyond their understanding.

May we be open to the miracles that God has in store for us. May we follow Jesus who is our miracle worker. And may the Spirit of God work in us to bring about the miraculous in our lives today.

And all God's people said, Amen.