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This is what it looks like when the creative power of God takes human form. That is the underlying message of the Gospel According to John. When the creative power of God enters our world, becomes Emmanuel, “God With Us,” that power, the ΛΟΓΟΣ, the Word, inaugurates a new era in human life, one in which fear is banished, one in which we love and share naturally, as we were meant to do. We are saved from fear, saved from selfishness, saved from our brokenness. This is what it looks like when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. This is what it looks like when we are in the presence of Jesus.

That is the message of the Gospel According to John and that is the message of our two conjoined miracle stories this morning. John’s Gospel is a very different telling of the story of Jesus from what are often known as the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so-called because they “see alike,” syn-optic, telling the story in very much the same way. Interestingly, to me at least, John follows Mark and Matthew by putting these two miracle stories together. And it seems to me that they cover some important ground in similar but different ways. Together, these stories proclaim the truth of the experience of being in the presence of Jesus; that is, that to be with Jesus and walk in his path is to experience what it is like to walk in the healing, loving presence of God. And, therefore, they show us what life can be like when we are saved from selfishness and fear.

So, this morning, I want to unpack for you the ways in which I see John and the other Gospel writers using these stories to help make the case that Jesus was the Messiah, as Matthew puts it, the Son of God, as Mark puts it, and the Word become flesh, as John tells us in his prologue. And, to more immediate impact, we’ll look at how these stories characterize life in the presence of Jesus, which is also, according to our faith, life in the presence of God.

Let’s look first at the feeding miracle and some traditional lessons to be pulled from that part of our story. In causing this miraculous feeding of God’s people, Jesus is shown to be extending the work of, or even fulfilling the work of Moses the Lawgiver and the prophets. For those first century Jews who heard this story or even experienced this event first-hand, the obvious parallel would have been Moses praying to God in the wilderness for food for the starving Children of Israel and the miraculous provision of manna. This feeding reveals Jesus as the new Moses, the new Lawgiver, whose words they should follow as he is blessed by God. Those who knew the deeper stories of Israel’s salvation history might also have remembered this more obscure story from the Second Book of Kings: “A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’” He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.” So Jesus also stands in the heritage of the great prophets of Israel. Just as the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration of Jesus can be seen as the Nazarene’s support from the Law and the Prophets, so can the feeding of the five thousand be seen as Jesus extending or perhaps fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, “the Law and the Prophets” being a phrase used at that time to mean the whole of Scripture.

The act of Jesus to feed the multitude in the desert would also have had other resonances for those gathered as well as for Matthew’s audience. These were a people, remember, who were

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waiting for deliverance, waiting for the Messiah. The 40th chapter of Isaiah contains a long description of the Messiah, much of which is familiar to us thanks to its inclusion in Charles Jennens' libretto for George Frederick Handel's famous oratorio, "Messiah." One of the arias is from Isaiah 40:11, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd..." As the feeder of the flock, Jesus is identified as the shepherd, the Messiah. Of course, Israel's ultimate shepherd is God, who, as our Psalm this morning reminded us, "give(s) them food in its time." By performing this miraculous feeding, producing food seemingly from nowhere, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, the only human who could have done such a thing.

There is, of course, a rationalist or modernist or reductionist or demythologized explanation for this miracle. Frankly, I am equally comfortable with either approach and I don't think it changes the meaning of this story to say that Jesus did not produce the food *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. That interpretation of the story says that, in fact, many of the people who'd followed Jesus out into the wilderness had sense enough to pack a lunch and bring it along, like the little boy. As my friend, Fr. John Foreman, remarked, "What mom takes her kids out for the day without bringing lunch and snacks?" But fearing there would not be enough for everyone, the moms and the kids and the couples and the singles kept their food under wraps until that one little boy (possibly urged by his mom) breaks the ice and offers to share their loaves and fishes. Reassured by this display of friendship and hospitality, out popped the loaves from under cloaks and the feast began. The moral authority, leadership, and care for the people that Jesus exhibits in this understanding of the miracle brings us right back to his identification with Moses and the prophets and his revelation as Messiah and Lord.

Yet another way to interpret this miracle has been popular since the time of the early Church and still works today. It is possible to read the story in a spiritualized or allegorical fashion and to say that it reveals Jesus as the one who feeds the people of God with the Word of God. Throughout the Bible, bread has been identified as a symbol of the Word of God. Jeffrey John, in his book, [The Meaning in the Miracles](#), notes that the rabbis of Jesus' time had already identified the manna in the story about Moses as the word of God descending from heaven. From this point of view, the question of whether Jesus caused bread that had not been there before to appear or whether he simply caused bread that was already there to be revealed is beside the point. The people needed to be nourished by Jesus' teaching and his presence as the Incarnate Word. They went away spiritually filled.

But whether we focus on the physical reality of the miracle or its spiritual dimension, this is clearly a story about Jesus providing an abundance for the people. This message of abundance was one that those who sought to pass on Jesus' teachings clearly identified with him. We will look in upcoming weeks at how the Gospel According to John reminds us of Jesus' teaching on himself as the Bread of Life which nourishes and satisfies. Jesus' stories about wedding banquets pop up again and again in the gospels, as well, of course, as John's story of Jesus at the wedding banquet in Cana. For those first century inhabitants of Palestine, the wedding banquet might be the only event at which they truly had a sense of abundance, more than enough to eat and the joy of their entire community. As a provider of an abundant feast, Jesus is seen as the instigator of the banquet, as the bridegroom. By his own teaching, the Kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet, when all Creation will be swept up in joy, when the hunger for the true feeding

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will be satisfied. As Jesus feeds the multitude, he gives them (and us) a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Beloved Community.

To live life in the presence of Jesus, then, means having trust in his power as the Word made flesh to deliver us from scarcity and want. We will not go hungry in our walk with Jesus. Somehow, there will be enough and so we can be bold to share of what we have. We can be bold, in the name of Jesus, to lovingly ask others to share what they have, too. When we are a part of a community that walks in the Way of Jesus, we can be sure that needs will be met. And even if we are alone, we can have confidence that we will be spiritually filled, that hungers need not drive us. Saturday morning, as I was wrestling with these ideas, I received a Facebook post from a helpful site called “Radical Discipleship.” It was quite apropos: “You and I, we have a hole in our soul. It's a God-sized hole, and we try to fill it with all sorts of things. Food and drink. Clothes and jewelry. Cars and houses and hobbies. We try to fill it with sports and movies and music. We even try desperately to fill it with people. Too often we just get clutter that makes it hard for God to get in. Once we know, really know, that only God can fill the soul-hole, everything changes. Pray today for uncluttering in your life and that of others.” Jesus saves us from that hunger.

Let's turn now to the second miracle for the morning, Jesus walking on the water. Historically, the Jewish people were quite familiar with the concept that human beings had no control over the watery environment beyond the shore. Like others of their land-faring neighbors, the Babylonians for example, the ancient Hebrews saw the sea as the embodiment of chaos and danger. We can still find echoes of this in Genesis 1:2 where we read of the formless void of waters, dark and dangerous, where the Spirit of God began to move and that God, in verse 6, subdues to create dry land. It is a uniquely monotheistic spin on a creation story that is otherwise quite similar to many others where two gods of nearly equal strength, one of heaven and one of the sea, fight until the land is created. To the Jews, only Yahweh, the one true God, could master the waters. They were not a sea-going people, by and large. The relative security of the lake or Sea of Galilee, storm-tossed though it is, was all they generally cared to venture. The relative vastness of the Mediterranean, which the Greeks and later the Romans made into their own private lake, was simply too daunting for the people descended, as Deuteronomy 26:5 puts it, from “a wandering Aramaean.”

In the words of the Anglican commentator, John Pridmore, a “visceral dread of the sea... characterises almost every reference to the sea in the Bible.” And, it should be added, in most of these references, Yahweh is shown as the master of the sea. Some of the great poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures can be found in passages praising God's reign over the chaos symbolized by the sea. Psalm 89:8-10 says, “O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed the dragon of the sea like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.” Job 26 contains Job's praise of God: “By his power he stilled the Sea; by his Wisdom he struck down the sea dragon. By his breath the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.” That's also, by the way, a nice bit of Trinitarian scripture, referencing God as Power, as Wisdom (the Greek *λογος*), and as breath, *ruach*, Spirit. Job also describes God as the One who “trampled the waves of the Sea” and Psalm 77 says of God, “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters...”

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In raising in his readers' minds the picture of the Creator God, whose Spirit brooded over the face of the deep, who shut up the seas and destroyed the spirit of chaos that lived in them, John is reiterating his remarkable claims about Jesus of Nazareth, that he is the Word made flesh. In the study of this story in his book, *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Jeffrey John writes: "In all the Old Testament passages that underlie (this story), the point is being made that God alone rules the waves and walks through the waters; God alone defeated the primal sea-monster; and God alone can defeat the demonic powers of chaos and evil." If that isn't enough, John remembers Jesus sealing the deal with his own words: "It is I; do not be afraid." The significance of this may escape us. But in the Greek in which John wrote, Jesus' words, "εγω ειμι," are exactly the same as Yahweh's words to Moses when He names Himself as "I AM WHO I AM," "εγω ειμι." It is not a normal construction and not one used to no purpose. The accompanying words, "do not be afraid," almost always announce an appearance of God or an angel of God in the Scriptures. John means us to understand the claim he is making for the carpenter from Nazareth. Jeffrey John writes, "Because we are so used to these stories, we risk missing how totally extraordinary this fact is: that writers who were Jews, trained in the Law, raised in the most monotheistic of faiths, should believe that in Jesus Yahweh's own power and authority had literally walked this earth in a human being."

But there is another claim here, too. Jesus not only has God's power over the sea, he has God's power over what the sea represents: the heaving, swirling world of chaos and challenges that beset each one of us, what Shakespeare's Hamlet refers to as "a sea of troubles." When Jesus is present in our lives, we may be awed, even terrified by his presence for, as Hebrews 10:31 notes, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." But Jesus' message to us is, "It is I; do not be afraid." As we walk with Jesus, the waves in our lives that threaten to swamp us become instead the current that gives power to our boat, helping us to get to the land where we are going immediately. As we walk with Jesus, our fears dissipate. As we walk with Jesus, we are saved from fear.

Or, to put it another way, there is this from one of the Fathers of the Church, the Fourth Century Algerian theologian and former actor, Augustine of Hippo: "Blessed are all thy saints, O God and King, who have travelled over the tempestuous sea of this mortal life, and have made the harbor of peace and felicity. Watch over us who are still in our dangerous voyage; and remember those who lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptation. Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide; but as in thy mercy thou hast set our course, so steer the vessel of our life toward the everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at last to the quiet haven of our heart's desire, where thou, O God, art blessed, and livest and reignest for ever and ever."

Jesus saves us from hunger. Jesus saves us from selfishness. Jesus saves us from fear. When we show the faith of the little boy with the loaves and fishes, when we put our trust in him, in the One who says, "It is I; do not be afraid," then we experience the Beloved Community in all its beauty, the Kingdom of God come to fruition in our lives. We are saved, saved by God's Anointed One, saved by God's love. Let us live in the trust of that promise. Thanks be to God.