

Sermon Proper 12B1      July 25, 2021 Fr. Nick Smith  
2 Samuel 11:1-15   Psalm 14      Ephesians 3:14-21   John 6:1-21

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

It was a dark and stormy night. The disciples were rowing like crazy across the lake, but the wind was howling and the waves were breaking over the bow. It was chaos, as it often is without the presence of Jesus, without the presence of God. No amount of human effort would save them, no amount of hysteria would manage to protect them from the hostile sea. The day had begun with promise, as it often did when they followed Jesus along the dusty Galilean roadways. Again, a crowd had gathered to follow, recognizing their little band with Jesus leading them in some random direction. On this day, though, the crowd had swelled to impossible proportions, and by afternoon numbered in the thousands. It was no longer a procession, but a mob. Like Moses, Jesus climbed up the side of a mountain and began to speak. God knows how many in the ridiculous crowd could actually get close enough to hear him. But as they were able to see, he stood tall and firm against the sky, and they observed his every gesture and thought themselves to be in the holy presence of a modern prophet. For many, that was evidence enough that God had favored them, that good times were about to break forth.

Thinking back, the disciples realized that they really had no possibility to control such a crowd. As they strained against the oars, not even quite sure which direction they were rowing there in the darkness, they wondered just what Jesus was thinking, egging that crowd on and having led them all to such a remote place. Though the day had begun in promise, it began to deteriorate when hunger had begun to set in. Asking around, the disciples found that a generous young boy was generously willing to share his five loaves of bread and two fish, but what was that among so many? And they were cheap barley loaves, probably stale. Certainly not freshly baked or worthy of a holy banquet. And, no doubt, the fish were dried for travel, certainly not the catch of the day. Barley loaves and dried fish! When they brought this news to Jesus, he didn't even seem concerned. He asked them what they would do, but their frustration didn't seem to phase him. He got that knowing look he sometimes got, as if his questions were just a test, and he already had the solution. He knew what he was going to do.

Now, they had seen his signs before, many in the crowd had for that matter, but even the disciples were astonished. He took that meager portion of food and, after deliberately giving thanks to the creator, he began to distribute it. And it went on and on, multiplying somehow until all were satisfied. The process took hours. It was as if Jesus were distributing his own being among them, as if there were no end to his substance. It was remarkable. As each one received from him, the generosity and love of his presence was somehow also received, and curiously, there was sustenance left over, enough to be saved for further nourishment. Better than Moses, frankly, whose manna in that ancient wilderness became toxic and inedible right away and couldn't be saved as leftovers. No, there was no explaining it away, this unexpected meal was a blessing. This feeding of so many thousands was a miracle. And it was yet another sign pointing to the real identity of Jesus. Jesus, everyone was beginning to realize, was the true prophet come into this world bearing God's authority and power. The one through whom all things were made, and made whole.

And then, a rumor began to spread through the crowd that Jesus could and should be made king, by public acclamation. This would not be for Jesus' sake, or for his honor, of course, but for theirs. What bragging rights they would have among their neighboring peoples, to have such a king for themselves?! A king who could work miracles, making them the envy of all the nations! And themselves a nation without need for material goods, without pandemic and illnesses! A nation far better than all others, ruled and served by unbridled authority, invulnerable and proud! Later, on the dark and stormy night at sea, the disciples shuddered at the memory of the melee which followed. The thousands pressed in upon them, like a stampede, and how they had fled, leaving Jesus behind to make his own way out. He withdrew into the wilderness, and they made for the boats. It was terrifying. Had the crowd forgotten their own history? How when their forbearers had come into Canaan and also wished for a prominent king to make them feel like a viable nation? Gad and Samuel had that discussion, remember? And God had made it possible for them to have a king, but warned them, through the prophet Samuel, that kings were inevitable flawed, that kings would send their young men into battle and degrade their young women into servitude. And had they forgotten how that warning came true. Despite David's anointing by God, despite all the spiritual capital God had invested in David, as a king he sat on his couch while his generals went off to fight his wars, he succumbed to lechery and adultery, and even arranged the murder of Uriah. David may have lifted the nation up, but at what a cost. He was an honored king, but he was no Savior. Is this what the crowd had wanted that evening on the hillside in Galilee?

And then, there in the dark, with the treacherous waves crashing against their boat, one disciple after another catches a frightening glimpse of a shadowy figure walking across the sea, stepping over the waves as if they were of no real consequence, and one by one they recognize the presence of Jesus. "It is I" he says, "do not be afraid." He is using the same words used by God when speaking with Moses at the burning bush. 'it is I' is translated also as 'I am', and Jesus uses that introduction to speak of himself as the Good Shepherd, the bread of Life, and the True Vine. I am, he says, to indicate that, in him, the presence of God Almighty is at hand and at work. The presence of Jesus is so precious and powerful, in fact, that the disciples find that their vessel immediately reaches the safety of the harbor. The presence of Jesus is a miracle, but also a fact. It is the reason we gather here this morning. It is the reason we witness through our lives and our enthusiasm. It is the reason we remind each other of the heritage of the faith. It is the reason we read scripture together. It is the reason we pray together. It is the reason that we pass the peace. It is even the reason we have coffee hour. The presence of Jesus is our joy and our purpose.

With deep tenderness, Paul writes to the church: I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.