

Picnics, Blue Skies and Smooth Sailing

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 29, 2012.
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on John 6:1-21.*

Two big stories today from the gospel of John: feeding the 5,000 and walking on water. They are wonderful stories that for those of us who grew up going to Sunday school almost invariably conjure scenes we remember from our childhood Bible or from the wall in our Sunday school room. Though hard to believe now, we never thought it odd that every person in the pictures had blond hair and blue eyes, including Jesus—his being the bluest and best of all! For genuine and persistent literalists, these accounts are among the ultimate litmus tests of orthodoxy; for people like me, they are troublemakers—and have been since the first time I asked the Sunday school teacher exactly how Jesus did that. In my first parish soon after leaving seminary here in New York, I was asked to speak to a large men's group on the Bible. Amazingly I stepped right up, not having lived long enough at the time to know that sharing too much on the first date is almost never a good idea. I proceeded to use these two stories as keen examples in the New Testament of the power of biblical metaphor and hyperbole and claimed them both as evidence of the narrator's desire to support his major theme, in this case John's very high sense of Christology.

After what I thought was a dazzling thirty minutes or so, I paused and asked for questions and comments. One older man, not heretofore known to be such a grouch, began speaking, "Now, Buddy, I like you." Though these sound like good words, in the order and tone they were offered, they clearly were not. Particularly when he followed with his next word "but," it was clear he was not headed anywhere good. "Now, Buddy, I like you," he said, "but I got to ask, son, what the hell they teaching you boys up there in New York City?"

To which I replied, "My goodness, look at the time. Let us pray."

All these years later the conversation continues. Although the current flap in the Episcopal Church, an argument about whether the Episcopal Church is dying, was prompted largely by the General Convention's approval of liturgies for same-sex blessings, it is in fact the same question: How is the Bible authoritative. It seems to be, and is for many of us, a tiresome question, one we think we have adequately answered. But the reason it must be addressed again and again is that our survivability as an institution—please note what is in danger, the institution, not God—depends on how honest we are willing to be in reading, appreciating and applying stories just like the two we heard this morning.

We are modern people, who live with and must question our ancient scripture no matter how we treasure it. What on earth are we supposed to do with stories such as these? My guess is that a number of us accept these as literal truth without much trouble, choosing to suspend our ordinary view of natural order, gravity and other principles of physics as a faith position. Another and larger group, I suspect, is unable to do that and offers some other understanding. A third group probably doesn't think it about it much, one-way or the other. Each group has the absolute right to exist, each can articulate sound arguments, and each is welcomed in this place and around this table without exception.

I am in the second group, which is to say I am not a literalist. To most of you, this is not a news bulletin. But there is an interesting thing about people in my camp that we don't always admit. Some of us easily fall prey to the appeal of another kind of literalism in trying to appropriate stories such as these. We twist them to make them literally true.

Here is an example of how this happens. In explaining the feeding of the multitude, some argue plausibly that the little kid's sharing of his fishes and loaves inspired a great outpouring of generosity from others among the throngs of people, leading to widespread sharing of resources far exceeding what was needed. That's a lovely idea that could be true. There is enough food on this globe to go around; we are simply unwilling to share. It is a super idea, but, as you no doubt see, it is a literal spin on a miraculous story; and as lovely as it is, I think it misses the point.

Others, in an attempt to make the walking on water story believable, have used the same principle. They claim that the boat was near the shore and that it only looked like Jesus was

walking on water, that in fact he was just walking in the shallow water at the edge of the lake. That one really bugs me. If I can't have a Jesus walking on water, I surely don't want one who is just wading in it. There is a better way *for me* in understanding this story.

Now to be clear, I don't have—and neither does anyone—a definitive idea about what was in the mind and heart of the writer of John's gospel. There are certainly arguments to be made that the use of symbolism in his narrative was prevalent. It is likely that stories involving Jesus and a large number of people at the end of a long day sharing a meal and of his having experiences on a boat in a choppy sea existed in several versions during the early years of the church. Clearly as well, both stories have shades of earlier Hebrew accounts connecting God and manna and acts of God in troubled waters. Also, given that John was written several generations after Jesus' death, my **guess** is that versions got bigger and bigger as they were told and retold.

Regardless, the feeding of the multitude and walking on water are huge stories for John. Jesus was the only and unmistakable Son of God. Jesus could create more from little, could turn water into wine, could raise sick friends from the dead. These were the stories that supported John's claim that Jesus was not only the Christ but the *only* way to God. It is John's Jesus who famously says, "No one comes to the father but by me." Even though I do not share that conviction, and in fact find it quite troubling, the writer no doubt believed it with all his heart. How the intensity of that belief truly affected the details in his narrative we will probably never know.

And in the end it really doesn't matter. The scripture either moves us or it doesn't. Consider this: Just as an experiment, reject the literal details, hearing this instead as a marvelous story about who Jesus is and what Jesus' life tells us about God. If we can do that, then the power of this ancient fable does not rest upon whether it literally happened or not but upon its essential truthfulness. It is true because it tells us about God:

- ❖ It tells us that God does not want us or any of God's children to be hungry and that God wants more than just the barest essentials but an abundance;

- ❖ It tells us that God loves the act of sharing with one another and that God never hesitates to use the love, spontaneity and generosity of a child to teach a lot of adults a big lesson;

- ❖ It tells us that God exists in ordinary things, like bread and fish; and it sets the stage for telling us that in these ordinary things eventually, like bread and wine, God will remind all who want to know that Christ is the bearer of bread that lasts forever, of food that will never run out; and

- ❖ It tells us that God is with us in all kinds of weather, stormy as well as clear, that when we are scared to death like these disciples so often were God will stand with us in the midst of our fear.

So for me, my brothers and sisters, there is no crisis with God. There is no unbridgeable gap between our experience as moderns and God—there is plenty of mystery, as in every era—but there is no gap. These stories are eternal. They give us an ethic by which to live and they give us an insight into the heart of God. None of that will ever die—and it is more than enough.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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