

## “Miraculous”

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*Texts: Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21*

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup> When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” <sup>17</sup> They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” <sup>18</sup> And he said, “Bring them here to me.” <sup>19</sup> Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

### 1

Imagine the disciples’ panic. Jesus had gone and done it again, withdrawing to a deserted place to pray. Right on cue, the crowds followed, streaming out of the towns and villages. And sure enough when evening came they were still there, a hike from anywhere. The disciples likely knew what that meant: hungry people are unruly people. The disciples came up with an expedient solution: send them away. Let the people fend for themselves. Move the problem to someone else’s turf. It would take a miracle to feed all those people. The rest, as they say, is our story. A miracle. Something fantastic and fanciful and belonging to another reality altogether.

I don’t know about you but I’m right with the disciples. Who could imagine such a solution? What was it about Jesus that made him able to imagine the plenty that was right at hand, when there was no food to be seen?

Abundance! God has nothing to do with scarcity, and everything to do with plenty. Can you stretch your minds enough to trust in God’s abundance? Jesus asked disciples.

### 2

In the 1967 movie *Bedazzled*, the devil tempts a man whose life is filled with disappointments. “Ask for whatever you want.” “OK,” he says: “I want fish and chips” (in the remake, I think it was a Big Mac). The devil whisks the man off to a fast food stand, places an order, and there it is!: a hot meal.

The man is disappointed.

He wanted — poof! — food to appear from out of nowhere. *That* would be a miracle.

Isaiah had a sarcastic word for miracle seekers: go ahead, take hold of the impossibly beautiful and perfect life you see in glossy magazines. Buy without money! You deserve as much as anybody! The next sweepstakes may be yours! Okay, Isaiah didn't actually refer to magazines and sweepstakes — but he seemed to know how people set their hopes in hollow promises.

But then the prophet gets real. Isaiah asks: why do you long for the pretty, advertised things? “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Why allow your imagination to be so small? God has already opened the divine hand and released for you a world of wonders. Drink deeply and eat richly: that is just the beginning of God's providing.

Miracles, you see, are not magical tricks that set aside the laws of nature. Miracles are not pie in the sky: they are the things that reveal the blessings that flow from God's without ceasing.

### 3

The preacher Tom Long tells the story of a student, home for the holidays, talking with his father about various problems confronted by the church today: poverty, homelessness, and other social ills. As they talked they walked down the street, headed toward a pay phone to call home to ask if they needed to bring home a pizza for dinner.

As fate would have it, on their way they were met by a homeless man who asked them, “Can you spare any change?”

The father reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of change, held it out to the man, and said, “Here, take what you need.”

The homeless man smiled, held out his hands, and took all of the change. Then they parted.

Heading on down the street, the young man and his father realized that they had given away all of their change. They needed a quarter for the telephone. Turning around, they said to the homeless man: “We forgot that we need to make a phone call. Can you give us back one of the quarters?”

The homeless man smiled, reached into his pocket, pulled out all of his change and said, “Here, take what you need.”

Imagine the sense of plenty and grace from a man who appeared to have nothing! There is one of God's true miracles: plenty that comes when least expected.

My own world weariness is redeemed by stories like this: A little boy once called at a gentleman's home and offered to sell some pictures for ten cents each. “What are you going to do with the money?” he was asked. “I'm raising a million dollars for earthquake relief,” he answered. “A million dollars!” the man laughed. “Do you expect to raise it all by yourself?” “No,” the boy replied, “my sister is helping me.”

We can appreciate this boy's spirit, even if we do have questions about his arithmetic. But the question for you and me is this: whom do you trust in more? The gentleman who knows the boy stands no chance of raising the money? or the boy whose mind and heart are ready to imagine that he can tap into the abundance of the universe and provide for people in need?

Whom do you trust in more? The disciples who can't imagine a source of food large enough? or the savior who knows that God will provide what we have not yet dared to dream?

Maybe the feeding of the thousands was a metaphor. Or, we may discover with a little research that it was the custom of the people of Palestine in those days to carry food in their sleeves, and the story of loaves and fishes becomes something much less than a miracle. Simple sharing is good — but it is not the gospel.

Jesus' leads us to a deepening awareness: we cannot be generous on our own. It is God who is generous, and every time we witness generosity we are seeing God at work, and every time we achieve generosity ourselves we have managed to let God work through us. The miracle of love is right at hand.

#### **4**

In Pennsylvania, years ago, nine trapped men crouched in a cold pitch-black mine, with the water rising. A strange gift appeared. A lunch pail, floating by. One miner opened it and miraculously, the corned beef sandwich was dry. He took a bite and passed it on to the next.

A miracle of sharing and abundance. God was there, in that gift of God for the people of God.

And if this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case it is the last: dare to imagine that God is doing miracles. Dare to trust in God's miraculous providing. Dare to become a part of the miracle, but giving away the abundance God has put into your hands.