

Feeding the Flock - July 26, 2009
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When you hear this first lesson from II Kings about Elisha and his feeding the multitude with only a little food, you might say, "Haven't I heard this song before?" Well you have - only you heard it after the fact. Elisha lived a long time before Jesus, but we have heard the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand ever since we started going to church.

So what is going on here? Well, obviously, since Elisha came before Jesus, the story wasn't borrowed from the New Testament. But, what about the other way around? Did the writers of the gospels "borrow" a story from the Hebrew Scriptures and use it to make Jesus look convincing? Or, did Jesus, knowing this story of Elisha, use it as a model for establishing himself as coming from God? Or, did Jesus' disciples and those who told the story and wrote the text remember the story and bring it up to date so that Jesus would be seen in the prophetic tradition?

I used to ask my confirmation classes what was different about Jesus? And the answers came quickly. They usually started out with the virgin birth that we read about in Matt. and Luke. They then talk about his being really smart and impressing the elders with his knowledge. There were always suggestions that his miracles set him apart – especially the feeding of the five thousand. And of course, there is Jesus being raised from the dead.

Once we got all these things on the table we looked at them to see how well they held up. Concerning Jesus' unusual birth - we have gone over the birth stories many times in sermons noting that Mark doesn't include the story of Jesus' birth, and St. Paul doesn't seem to even be aware of the story. Furthermore, there are a few characters in history who are credited with miraculous births – some with special stars yet. And, of course, Jesus was smart. But what about Solomon – the wisest of all the Old Testament characters?

Jesus fed five thousand with a few loaves and fishes. But we have Elisha doing almost the same thing in today's first lesson.

And then there is the story of Elijah miraculously providing food so that the widow and her son, with whom he is staying, can keep eating in spite of the famine that surrounds them. There is the story of Jesus miraculously providing wine at the marriage feast at Cana. But if you read the story carefully he does so only after his Jewish mother tells him to, "Do something!"

But Gautama, the Buddha, went to a wedding, where they ran out of wine and food, and he miraculously provided both food and wine for the guests. Buddha lived five hundred years before Jesus.

Jesus was resurrected from the dead. But Elisha brought the widow's son back to life. Elijah, himself, was taken, bodily, to heaven in a fiery chariot.

And, Jesus brought his friend, Lazarus, back from the grave.

Well – where does all this leave us? It could leave us cynical, but it doesn't. It could leave us doubting, but it doesn't. It could leave us wondering - and that's o.k. because wonder always implies amazement.

The fact is Jesus and the relationship he had with his followers transcended any of the particulars of his life. We find ourselves at the foot of the cross, not questioning our Lord, but thanking him. Because the question isn't, "Did this or that happen?" – or, "What happened first?" The question is whether or not Jesus is present in your life as he said he would be through the Holy Spirit.

If you think about it, those who wish to make Jesus God's son because he did miracles won't be very satisfied in the end. Why – because Jesus said so. Remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus? The rich man fared sumptuously every day, while poor Lazarus sat at his gate and the dogs licked his sores. They both died, and Lazarus ended up in the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man lay in a fiery torment. The rich man asked Abraham if Lazarus could bring him a sip of water, but Abraham said he couldn't because the rich man had had his feast while on earth and had ignored this poor suffering beggar at his gate. So the Rich man asked Abraham if he could please go back and warn his brothers what was in store for them if they didn't show more mercy and kindness to those in need. And Abraham again said, "No." – that they had Moses and the prophets and if they didn't believe them they wouldn't believe even if someone rose from the dead.

Jesus didn't do miracles to get people to believe in him. He fed people so that they would realize that life was more than food. He fed them so that they would realize he was the bread of heaven.

Jesus didn't come to earth to be the greatest magician ever. He came out of a rich Jewish messianic tradition. He was part of God's chosen people. He came to bring us into God's family. He came to join us with that family so that we too could be redeemed.

He came to offer himself as a sacrifice – not for the few – but for all. He didn't come into the world to condemn it, but to save it.

The Church became that community of the faithful who, knowing that Jesus is in their midst, celebrates the new life we experience in him.

Our second lesson from Ephesians sums it up magnificently. St. Paul wrote:

For this reason I bow my knees to 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 the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work with 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 (3:14-21)