

*Bread in the Wilderness*

Mark 6:30-44

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Makiki Christian Church

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We're starting this morning with a photograph—one that many of you will find familiar. The title of this photo is "Tomoko Uemura in her bath." Many of you probably know something about the circumstances and the story surrounding this picture. But for a moment, imagine that this is the first time that you've seen this photo, and all you know about it is what you see. What would your reaction be?

Most of us would probably feel shock and dismay at the obvious extent of Tomoko's deformities. Some might focus on the tender love that Tomoko's mother expresses. The more medically astute might suspect that Tomoko suffers from more than just a random birth defect. If this photo were all we had to go on, perhaps these thoughts and feelings would pretty much define the boundaries of how most people would react.

But what if we also knew the story behind the picture? What if we also knew the context, the "bigger picture" so to speak, of this one snapshot? The story, in a nutshell, is this. The photo was taken in 1971 by W. Eugene Smith, an American photographer, in Minamata, Japan. Tomoko Uemura was the victim of fetal mercury poisoning. For decades, the factories of Minamata had been dumping mercury into the sea and river, and thousands of people in the region suffered nerve disorders and birth defects. The tragedy was that because the industry served as the economic base of the community, residents, along with the factory and government, turned a blind eye to the disaster. Until Gene Smith brought pictures like these to the world via *Life* and other magazines.

For his efforts, factory goons beat Smith viciously, badly injuring him and causing him to lose part of his sight for the remainder of his days. His photos, however, comprise one of the earliest and most heroic of environmental exposes.

So how does this "bigger picture" change the way that we view the image? Knowing the context makes it impossible to take this as just one family's tragedy. We can even discern the gospel story in a way: a people living in darkness, a kind of hell on earth. Then someone from the outside comes in, dwells with them, and brings some light—the light of global attention. And the one who comes pays a high price of persecution and suffering.

Sometimes, when we know the bigger picture, it adds a whole new dimension of meaning to what we are looking at. With this in mind, let's now turn to our Scripture passage. The feeding of the 5,000 is one of the most well-known and beloved stories in the Gospels. All four Gospels include this story—the only

miracle story so covered. It presents us with a powerful and memorable image. Mark sets the stage for us. The disciples have just returned from the mission they had been sent on by Jesus, which Pastor Brad preached on last week. The disciples are exhilarated but also exhausted. Jesus wants to give them a break, so they try to retreat by boat to a quiet place. But the crowds follow them along the shoreline, and when they land, they are still surrounded and besieged.

The disciples want Jesus to send the crowd away when evening approaches, but Jesus, who sees the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd,” has compassion on them. “You give them something to eat,” he tells his disciples.

The disciples are taken aback. That would take a lot of money! Eight months’ wages, in fact, as the NIV interprets for us.

And then, with five small loaves and two fish that they find among themselves, the miracle happens. Five thousand men are fed, which means that if women and children were also present, many more were fed as well.

What a picture. If we focus on this image alone, what might we draw from it? What would catch our attention?

We might notice Jesus’ compassion—first for his disciples, who were being kept so busy with the crowd that they weren’t even able to eat. Jesus called them away to a quiet place for rest. But then Jesus also expressed compassion on the persistent crowd, the shepherd-less flock. Instead of sending them away, he taught them, at length. Then he fed them, too.

We could hardly miss the message of divine provision. We are led to ask again, “Who is this man Jesus, who can do such things?”

We might suspect that with the 12 baskets of leftovers, there is some kind of symbolic meaning connected with Israel as a people, because in the Old Testament, Israel forms around 12 sons and their tribes.

So far, so good. But what happens if we place this miracle story in a bigger context? The bigger picture in which the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole find their place is the Hebrew Scriptures, which we usually refer to as the “Old Testament.” You may remember that at the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark links his writing with this body of work. He begins his Gospel with quotations from the Hebrew prophets: *Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*

Jesus comes not out of the blue, not as a completely new and never-before-seen sort of figure. He comes in a line of leaders of Israel. And the most important figure who modeled leadership for Israel was Moses. Moses, the

leader of the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Moses, the prophet. Moses, the Law-giver. Moses the miracle worker.

Put Moses in the backdrop to the Gospels and what we can see is Jesus fitting into every key role and expectation of a Second Moses.

Moses worked signs and wonders. So does Jesus.

Moses had command over the waters of the sea. So does Jesus. Moses parted the waters; Jesus calms the waters.

Moses brought God's word to God's people. So does Jesus.

And in our story today, just as Moses fed God's people in the wilderness, so now Jesus does the same in an equally miraculous, an equally divine way.

For any Jewish person in Jesus' day who still lived in the faith narrative of Israel, it would have been impossible to miss the parallels between Jesus' works and Moses. Certainly the early church didn't miss the connections.

(And if all this weren't enough, a few chapters further into Mark's Gospel, Moses and Elijah will appear with Jesus before a few of the disciples. Individually, each of these snapshots from Mark's Gospel tells us something important about who Jesus is.)

The feeding of the 5,000 (and later, the 4,000) isn't just a wonderful miracle of provision (though it is that, certainly). It is part of a consistent Gospel testimony as to who Jesus really is, and what God is up to in Jesus. Jesus is like a second Moses, and like Moses, God was using Jesus not only to *free* a new people, but also to *form* a new people of God.

God freed the Hebrews in order to form them as his people. God frees us from the power of sin in order that *we* may be formed as his witnessing community today. Thinking of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in light of what it meant to be a member of Israel helps to keep us from reducing the gospel to cheap grace, to a religious commodity.

It is less about "getting into heaven" and more about letting heaven get into us now, shaping us, forming us as individuals and as a community. The struggles of Israel in the wilderness and in the Promised Land are *our* present day struggles as well as the *church*. Will *we* keep the faith and follow Jesus? Will *we* murmur and complain? Will *we* go after false gods?

I suspect that when we don't see the New Testament in the context of both testaments, we find it easier to fall into the habit of reading the Bible like a kind of restaurant menu. We look through it and let ourselves be attracted to those "blessings" that sound good to us. And we think, well, if I have enough faith "currency," then all I need to do is claim this blessing, that blessing. We might even think of this as spiritually nutritious in some way. But in doing this, we don't

see how we are putting ourselves at the center of the universe. We treat God as though his purpose is merely to serve us, when in fact, God is in the business of *saving* us—and one of the primary things he saves us from is our inborn self-centeredness!

When we have our eyes open to the Bible's big picture and interpret each individual story in light of the big picture, it's more likely that *God* stays at the center. Because the Bible is God's story. And it is harder for us to displace God with the big picture in view.

We may also find it easier to see that what the Gospel invites us to do is to join up, to become a part of God's story by becoming part of the people who follow Jesus.

When Jesus taught with authority and performed signs and wonders, he evoked in his Jewish hearers the shaping story of their lives. He reminded them that even though Caesar was emperor, Caesar was not Lord. Even though the Romans occupied Israel, Rome could not rule their hearts, unless they let Rome do so. And Jesus called those with ears to hear to let God be God. He called them back to their true heritage, their true calling. To their real story, the story of God seeking to call a people his own, who would call him God and God alone.

We might ask ourselves, "Whose story am I living out primarily?" And how does the story of Jesus intersect and become a part of my story?

A lot of people today find a connection with the story of Jesus through that memorable description in verse 34, where Jesus has compassion on the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. That's where a lot of people are today, and where I would guess most of us have felt we have been at one time or another. Like sheep without a shepherd. May we all find in deeper and more consistent ways how indeed the Lord is our Good Shepherd, and where we follow him, indeed we shall not want.