

David and I have a habit of checking the weather in the morning, a practice which started when we lived through several winters in Wisconsin. It was a matter of safety in those days to know things like windchill and what emergency supplies you might want in the car. Nowadays, it's mostly a matter of curiosity, so we ask Alexa or our weather channel app what the day will bring. I'm always interested in radar, and in the way weather patterns tend to move from southwest to northeast. Over the last week and a half, though, it seems that that weather system just stalled right on top of us. Our rain gauge registered over 10 inches dumped on our yard while that system just sat there.

A stalled weather system is an excellent image for what is about to happen to us with our Gospel readings in the next five weeks. Starting today and throughout August, we will be stalled right here in John Chapter 6, enjoying what is known as the Bread of Life discourse. It is Jesus' teaching about himself and the kingdom of God using the metaphor of bread. In our lectionary readings we usually move along quickly through Scripture or jump around; it is unusual to spend five weeks in just one chapter, much less on a single topic.

As we begin John 6 today we have not just one but two iconic stories. The miracle of the loaves and fishes is the kick-off to all the bread stories we have coming. Then, the feeding of the 5000 is, interestingly, followed immediately by John's version of Jesus walking on water, a story that occurs in three of the four gospels.

When stories are juxtaposed this way, I always like to get curious about that. What might we learn from the way different episodes are placed side by side? I want to look at these two miracles of Jesus together in a single glance. Let's see how they might fit together to offer us something.

As John 6 begins, Jesus and his friends have been attracting a lot of attention. The crowds are obsessed by the miracles Jesus is performing all over the place... the signs and wonders. There is an excitement surrounding Jesus and his friends, not unlike the frenzy created by a boy band. Today they are on a mountainside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and the following crowd has grown to 5000. Here, we have this dramatic, Eucharistic moment. Jesus gives thanks, breaks and distributes the bread and fish to the crowd—five loaves of bread and two fish—and he keeps giving until everyone has had more than they could eat. A true miracle of abundance, generosity and hospitality.

And how does the crowd show its thanks? They nearly become a mob. They are completely filled by this miraculous meal, but they misunderstand what Jesus is doing. Their response is to try take him by force and make him king.

And Jesus isn't having it. He is not willing to let the mob decide who he is. Jesus' self-giving and abundant love is not controlled by human expectation. He withdraws into the mountains for a little retreat time.

Then the scene changes. As evening comes, the disciples get on a boat and set out to cross the Sea of Galilee, leaving Jesus behind. It gets dark and stormy. When they had rowed about three or four miles—one estimate said this would be two or three hours of hard rowing on the stormy water—all of a sudden they see Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat. What is their response? They were terrified. These people who knew him best were terrified when they saw him, because he was so unexpected. And yet he came to them anyway. He sought them out, not deterred by the storm.

So we have these two groups of people: the 5000, and the disciples.

The crowd of 5000 strangers back on the mountain surely would have been disappointed in Jesus. Why would he run off? Why wouldn't he do what they wanted

him to? The crowd didn't get what they wanted. They tried to force Jesus' hand and tried to make him into the kind of king a mob wants. His response was to withdraw; he refused to be king on their terms. He told them "No." No to all their ambitions and delusions of power and control. We see this again and again in scripture, God rejects the powers and principalities of this world—"casts down the mighty from their thrones."

And Jesus' friends? When they saw him coming...when the people who knew Jesus best saw him coming towards them across the stormy sea...they were scared. That Jesus. Always doing something you don't expect.

We do not get to make God in our own image, to force him into our own mold. This is, of course, exactly what we see in so much of religious life nowadays: people claiming that Jesus thinks exactly the way they do, that God hates who they hate. Jesus will not be told what to do: his rejection of the mob's plan shows us this. But Jesus does come in the storm. Whatever hard, discouraging rowing we have to do, we can count on the fact that Jesus chooses to come to us, chooses to love and cherish us no matter what. No matter what our attitude may be toward God or the Church, no matter what we may say or do, God just goes ahead and accepts and loves us. No exceptions. God exercises power over stormy forces and chooses to come to us. God chooses us. And God says "Do not be afraid." Again I remind you: We don't get to make God in our own image. But God DOES come to us in the storm. And says "Do not be afraid."

*O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*