

This is Indeed the Prophet!

TEXT: John 6:1-21

PHBF 03.26.17

Scr. Reading: John 6:1-21

BELIEVE! The Gospel of John

I'm sure you've all had that experience where you read a book or hear a talk that reveals depth and meaning you had no idea was there before. Something you thought was relatively simple and straightforward, but this angle or this expert reveals there's so much more to the story. A while back some friends told me about a documentary they watched about salt.

We've all seen the iconic photograph from the Kennedy assassination when the Presidential limo is pulling away just after the fatal shot and that Secret Service agent has leapt onto the trunk. I've had an interest in the Kennedy assassination since college, and I've looked at that picture hundreds of times. But last May I read a fascinating book by Clint Hill, the agent in that photo, entitled *Five Days in November*. Agent Hill was obviously a member of the Kennedy security detail, but his specific assignment was to protect Jackie. The details he shared about that event and his insight into Jackie's experience—and, of course, his own—dramatically deepened my understanding and appreciation of that tragic snapshot of American history.

You think this thing before you is clear and straightforward and you've got all there is to get, and then somebody comes along and shows that you didn't understand half of the story.

The Apostle John does that in our text today with two of the most familiar stories from Jesus' life—feeding the 5000 and walking on the water. They are wonderful stories with significant implications about Jesus' power, compassion, and even His deity (walking on water → God). But John wants us to see even more than that—namely, that Jesus is the Messiah, Israel's king. Not the king they wanted but the king they most deeply needed. A king like Moses, leading an entirely new and greater exodus, delivering His people from their ultimate enemies, sin and death.

John sets it up for us in verses 1-4:

vv1-4 *After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him,*

because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.

v1 “other side” = the east side, where cities were fewer. Sometimes “the far side” (NIV), since the west side was more predominantly Jewish
v2 “large crowd following... because they saw the signs” = attraction to Jesus was for less-than-exemplary reasons. Drawn to His miracles, the sensation, what He could do for them, and later in this chapter He directly confronts that attitude.

v3 “mountain” = hill country around the lakeshore

v4 “Passover” - The 2nd of 3 Passovers John mentions (cf. 2:13, 11:55). This is how we know Jesus' ministry lasted at least 2-3 years (the other gospels give no periodic time references like this, making it conceivable that Jesus' entire ministry could have taken place in one year).

John's point here—as with the other Passovers he mentions—is more theological than chronological. In fact, I want to suggest that we will miss the whole significance of what follows in this chapter if we miss John's reference to the Passover. THIS IS NOT A THROW-AWAY DETAIL!!! It is the lynchpin to John's whole point.

In chapters 2-4 (water to wine, “destroy this temple,” Nicodemus, woman at well), Jesus demonstrates His superiority over Jewish institutions:

- The new wine of the kingdom has replaced the old rites of purification.
- The Lord's own body has replaced the old temple.
- The old life has been replaced with the new birth.
- Jacob's well has been replaced by the living water from Christ Himself.
- The old worship of Jerusalem and Gerizim has given way to worship in spirit and truth.

From here, Jesus participates in four feasts in a row (5:1, 6:4, 7:2, 10:22) and demonstrates His superiority over/fulfillment of those festivals.

- Sabbath (5:1-47): “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (v17).
- Passover (6:1-71)

- Feast of Booths (7:1-9:41)
- Hanukkah/Dedication (10:1-39)

So, in sum: Jewish institutions (chs 2-4); Jewish festivals (chs 5-10). The point is, these are far more than mere stories. They are theological lessons illustrating Paul's claim (2 Cor 5:17) that for anyone in Christ, "the old has gone, the new has come."

Chapter 6 is the longest chapter in the Bible and will be our text for the next 4 Sundays. It is all set in the context of the Passover—the feast which celebrated Israel's redemption from Egypt by the power of God and the blood of a slaughtered lamb. This is a key festival in John's gospel, and I'm sure you can understand why. John's gospel presents Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. All three times John mentions the Passover, he is driving home this connection—Passover lamb and Jesus the Lamb of God / deliverance from Egypt and deliverance from sin / shadow and fulfillment.

- The First Passover – Jesus says "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up again in three days," speaking of the temple of His body—an obvious allusion to His death.
- The Third Passover – actually brings us to the very point of Jesus' death. John has Jesus on the cross right at the exact time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered (Jn 19:14).
- This Second Passover – Jesus feeds the 5000 which launches Him into the "Bread of Life" discourse, where Jesus claims His flesh is the true bread from heaven that must be eaten if people are to have eternal life.

The connections are many and point to the rich way Jesus fulfills (i.e., "fills full") these Old Testament shadows: the death of the Passover lamb anticipates Jesus' death, the manna gives way to the real Bread of Life, Israel's exodus from Egypt finds fulfillment in the deliverance Jesus offers from our slavery to sin, the Passover feast celebrated by families is taken over by the Lord's Supper celebrated by the New Covenant family of God.

Of course, at the time, none of this would have been obvious. There situation was much more straightforward and, on the face of it, much more pressing:

vv5-7 *Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these*

people may eat?" ⁶ *He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.* ⁷ *Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."*

v5 Philip – John in the only gospel writer to tell us which disciple Jesus approached for help. Why Philip? 1:44 tells us he was from Bethsaida, which was on this same side of the Sea of Galilee. In other words, Philip was a natural choice because he was from nearby.

The partial picture of Philip we receive from the gospels portray him as something of a bean counter. He sees the crowd, does the math, and gives his answer: "No way!"

- A denarius was one day's wage for an average worker; 200 denarii = 8 months pay (cf. NIV)
- Even with that much cash in hand, Philip realizes everybody would only get a bite or two – "each to get a little"

Verse 6 tells us Jesus knows all this and is utterly unconcerned about the problem. He's only brought Philip into the discussion "to test him" – i.e., to prove to Philip that his faith in Jesus still needed some work. Philip sees only a problem with no solution.

Another disciple, Andrew, does slightly better:

vv8-10 *One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,* ⁹ *"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"* ¹⁰ *Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.*

Andrew seems sincerely hopeful and trying to be helpful, but once he hears himself make the suggestion, he's embarrassed by it. "This kid has 5 loaves and 2 fish in his lunch... Wait. What? Never mind." Verse 10 tells us exactly why the suggestion seems so ludicrous: there were 5000 men in this crowd, meaning the entire group was probably somewhere near 20,000 people. Quite a group to feed with one lunch.

"Barley" = the grain of the poor, highlighting the poverty of this crowd. Jesus isn't stymied at all. He tells the disciples to direct the people to find a seat, takes the boy's lunch, and then...

vv11-13 *Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.* ¹² *And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples,*

"Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.

v13 is rich with irony—John doesn't simply tell us there were twelve baskets of leftovers; he expressly says these were leftovers "from the five barley loaves." Five loaves would fit in one shopping bag; certainly in one grocery cart. But that was before lunch. After lunch—after all 5000 men plus women and children ate—they needed twelve baskets to pick up the leftovers. More left over than they started with!

The mind strains to take it all in; but strain we should, because it's a marvelous miracle. I wonder if the disciples tried to piece any of those fragments together to figure out what happened. But actually, none of that is the point here. Jesus is not going for shock and awe; He's teaching.

The miracle happens in verse 11, but without any comment or explanation from John. Jesus simply "distributed the loaves... and so also the fish, as much as they wanted." It's like the miracle of the water to wine—the supernatural action of Jesus is not the point. John almost downplays that part—all our natural questions about how Jesus did it and whether people clapped or fainted he completely ignores. This is not a magic show, where the whole point is to wow the crowd. ***It's a signpost, a lesson, an invitation to ask "What does this mean?" rather than "How did He do that?"***

It's obviously reminiscent of Moses' provision of the manna in Ex 16:18, 35. God's people in the wilderness with nothing to eat. God provides food and suddenly each person had as much as each could eat, every day, until the Promised Land. This crowd sees the connection immediately:

v14 *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"*

"the Prophet"

Deuteronomy 18:15 *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers- it is to him you shall listen*

The crowd rightly understood the miracle as a fulfillment of OT promises. But they had the wrong reaction. Right interpretation; wrong application.

v15 *Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

Passover for Israel was like July 4 for America. Nationalistic zeal ran hot during this celebration, and understandably so. But Jesus knows that this is neither the time nor the way for Him to become King and He extricates Himself and sends the disciples away:

vv16-17 *When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.*

The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide—a large body of water. It lies about 600 feet below sea level. In the evening, cool air from the east can sometimes rush in and meet the warm moist air over the lake, creating a violent squall out over the water.

vv18-19 *The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.*

vv20-21 *But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.*

Notice Jesus' words in verse 20: "It is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus literally says, "I AM. Do not fear." He takes the divine name on Himself to calm their fears. "I AM is with you in this storm. Do not be afraid." This is not just a miracle story; it's a moment of divine revelation.

The disciples are much like the crowd—simply glad to get Him in the boat and be safe. But John wants us to see more. John wants us to understand and appreciate Jesus for everything He is on His terms, not our own.

Applications:

1. Like the crowd? Want Jesus to fix your problems on your terms? The temptation to respond to Jesus like the crowd, wishing to fit Him into their own categories and serve their own agenda. They want to control Him, use Him.
2. Like Philip and Andrew? See the reasons why it can't work instead of the Savior who can.

3. Just bored, flat, unengaged with Jesus.

It's tempting sometimes to wish we could go back and live some of these stories in the Bible—walk out with the Israelites one morning and gather up manna. Stroll through the Red Sea on dry ground with water piled up on both sides. Listen to Moses and see his face glow, knowing he had been in the very presence of God Himself. It sometimes feels like our own experience of God is so mystical, so vague, so puny. If only we could go back and experience THAT! But Jesus' actions in these two stories show that would lessen our relationship with God. It would be a decline, not an advancement. Deterioration, not progress. If those of us on this side of the cross were thrown back into the stories of the OT, we would be going immeasurably backward in our relationship with God. The manna was real, yes, but a shadow of the true Bread of Life. The Red Sea crossing was awesome, no doubt, but it was nothing compared to your own rescue from the flood of God's judgment which hung like a wall of water along the path you were on, just waiting to sweep you away forever. Those were shadows from the age of promise. You know reality in the age of fulfillment!

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