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My Favorite Bible Miracle

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My Favorite Bible Miracle, the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, appears in all four gospels. This story refracts, like a prism, into our faith history to shine a light on the miracles with bread that precede it in the Old Testament. Before I read our gospel lesson, I will share several of these stories, which were known by our Jewish ancestors before they sat down and feasted at Jesus' hands, and by those who recorded this miraculous event. These collected stories are the bread of life.

Please pray with me.

Dear God, we come to you with a hunger, a hunger we often cannot name, or a hunger we doubt can be satisfied. Feed us with your word. Feed us with the bread of life that we learn to trust you and the love revealed by your son, our savior, Amen.

To believe in miracles asks us to suspend much of what the world tells us is true.

Our world is constructed by secular thoughts, powerfully influencing our intellectual curiosity. In secular ways of thing, we look for proofs and repeatable experiments to validate what others claim to be true. This way we cannot be swayed by lies.

This approach works when there are problems to be solved.

And yet, the more we live, the more we experience life as a mystery, not answerable to such inquiry. What is my goal? How do I love? When should I forgive? To live with mysteries challenges us to hold on to critical thinking skills and at the same time humbly acknowledge our limits, gratefully accept the miraculous, and look for meaning.

Stories of miracles, events that cannot be attributed to human acts or outside of our conceived understanding of nature, abound in our faith history.

These stories invite our sense of imagination of the world God construct for us and for our good. Faith asks to imagine a world not divorced from the natural order, but encompassing it, showing us its wonder.

Quite simply, a miracle is God's extraordinary presence in the midst of the ordinary. To be open to a miracle is to understand something of God and God's devotion to us.¹

In the vast array of stories of survival, one element dominates – bread. Common bread. Sufficient for all. Given by the hand of God. So, let's explore scripture. As you listen, notice the common plot and outcome.

Recorded in our most ancient of text, God rescues the Israelites from Egyptian bondage by protecting them from as devastating plagues pass over their homes. On a moment's

¹ Samuel Kobia, "What is in a Miracle? Feeding the Five Thousand," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 59 No 4, October 2007, 533-536.

notice, they trusted Moses' command to flee from their homes. Listen to the account in Exodus:

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD. Take your flocks and your herds, and be gone...."

The people took their dough before it was leavened...

(Later) They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out. (Exodus 12:31-39, selected verses)

Once liberated, they quickly lost faith, as their rations dwindled. The story continues...

The Israelites said (to Moses), "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we...ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. (Exodus 16:3-4 adapted)

When God tests, God teaches.

When exiles wandered, God fed, teaching the Israelites over several generations to trust God's presence in their daily lives with their daily bread.

These stories, tightly coupled, remind the Israelites that God protected them as death passed over their homes, delivered them from bondage, and sustained them. This is what they celebrate in the Passover ritual.

Listen to another story from 1 Kings recorded centuries later of the prophet Elijah. He was on the run during a time of famine and sent to enemy territory.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." When he came to the gate, a widow was there; he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; make me a little cake and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD: The jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jug of oil will not fail." (1 Kings 17:8-16 selected verses)

They survived. The miracle is more than just starvation-sized rations of bread feeding them in a prolonged drought, the miracle is two people who should have been enemies trust God and trust one another to eat together, to share a life, and to find a way forward when there was nothing they could individually see but death.

Elijah's successor, Elisha, carries on his prophetic message and encounters a human hunger amid abject scarcity. Second Kings records:

A man came, bringing food: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

So Elisha repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left. (2 Kings 4:42-44)

Scripture helps us imagine God's world, a world of abundance. When we approach scripture not as an anthology of random stories, locked in the past but as a witness to predict our future, not as a random assortment of ideas about the world, but as coherently held by God, we receive meaning we can trust.²

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God's Presence and Power in Creation*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 51. Johnson's text is a treasure trove of wisdom of the reception history of miracles through the ages and exegetical insight into our holy text.

Now we turn to our gospel lesson of the day. The Gospel of John seek to answer the great question, “who is Jesus.” Listen to the story:

⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

⁸ 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 among so many people?”

¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus 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 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

Did you hear it?

Common throughout this story and all the prior stories: grace comes first. No one, not even God, tests the recipient’s faith prior to offering them bread. Grace comes first.

Think of it as feeding a hungry toddler. Only after you satisfy him will the fussing stop, and he learn to trust.

God never scares us into relationship. Rather God brings us out of a crisis and invites us to remember.

Another common element is that indiscriminate way God feeds, gathered crowds of women and men, believers and heretics, Israelites and foreigners. Each life matters to God.

A hunger in the belly calls up many hungers – for love, intimacy, fulfillment. These are the hungers no amount of money will satisfy.

When we hunger for more than food, too often we are unable to speak of our need because we cannot even name it.

Or, we might be embarrassed by our need.

As we sit here, imagine if the person next to you asked, what are you hungry for? What might you say? “Oh, I’m just fine.” Knowing deep down you feel an emptiness. Or you might whisper, “I want to be accepted.” Or, “It is hard to admit, I am hungry to trust God.” Or, “This world seems so broken and I don’t even know what will heal us.”

What miracle is in your prayers? Healing, reconciliation with an estranged loved-one, forgiveness?

We heard the line-up of stories of God satisfying our hunger. The same crescendo of miracles could be aligned of God commanding nature – splitting the waters, walking on waters, calming a storm.

If we cannot believe God so loves the life God created and sustains us with daily bread, and all the other miracles in our own lives, how can we believe Jesus’ promise to share in his resurrection?

The extraordinary events in the gospel witness to the reality God wants for us, now. It is not the will of God that people should go hungry, either bodily or spiritually. The miracles repeat and repeat, God wants us to share an abundant life.³

³ Kobia, *Ecumenical*, 535.

Logos. A poem by Mary Oliver.

Why worry about the loaves and fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
and the felt ferocity of that love
and the felt necessity of that love,
the fish explode into many.
Imagine him, speaking,
and don't worry about what is reality,
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.

A Summer Blessing

May the summer sun touch your soul
with warm rays of God's love.
May the summer rain fill your heart,
creating a well of Christ's presence.
And may the gentle breeze
ruffle your spirit, so that in its movement
you recognize the same breath of Creation that lives in you.



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