

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Good News Makes the Impossible Possible

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One of my colleagues recently posted their growing despair about preaching good news in a time when the world feels anything but good. War abroad, terror in our cities, financial instability, it's whiplash. They wrote,

“We're called to be shepherds, I know, but I'm so bone weary of all these wolves.”

That weariness names something true: it can feel almost impossible to speak of hope when the world keeps offering evidence to the contrary.

Yet faith asks us to remember that God sent Jesus into a world every bit as brutal marked by oppression, violence, and an unstable ruler capable of unthinkable harm.

Into that world, Jesus points to the impossible happening.

The gospels teach us the paradox of believing and living according to good news in a world that wants to deny it, even destroy it. Our story today takes up as the disciples regroup after going two-by-two in the neighboring towns, with only the clothes on their backs.

That's trust: Jesus sent his fledgling disciplines with a companion, whom they may or may not have known prior meeting him, to preach good news, all the while relying upon the hospitality of strangers, in these unfamiliar places.

Jesus gathers his road-weary disciples. They likely want to share their stories of casting out demons, healing the sick, and mind-blowing impossible feats as they rest from their journey.

God

*We gather to hear your son's message of good news
at a time when it seems impossible.*

*Calm us. Settle us. Send your spirit among us
so that as we listen, we remember,*

With you, anything is possible.

We believe. Help our unbelief.

Mark 6:32-44

And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

³⁴ As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.

³⁵ When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat."

³⁷ But Jesus answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"

³⁸ And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."

³⁹ Then Jesus ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and he divided the two fish among them all.

⁴² And all ate and were filled, ⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of fish. ⁴⁴ Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

When we wrestle with life and our faith, these questions swirl: How does God see the world? And how does God want us to see—and live in—it?

Whether or not we spend time pondering the world's beginning or our own end, we all live with some sense of an ultimate source. We all have a picture of who God is, whether God exists, even if we've never tried to put it into words. In that sense, we all live by a theology.

As youth come of age in the church, we ask them to name what they believe in the rite of confirmation – literally confirming their faith. The Pastor Nominating Committee closely examined the candidates' statements of faith to discern their conception of God.

What we believe about the nature and desire of our Creator shapes the choices we make. Our belief shapes our ethics—because everyone lives by a set of ethics, whether we realize it or not.

The late Douglas John Hall, an academic who studied theology once wrote:

These are really two parts of the same question, for people's attitudes toward the world invariably mirror their underlying concepts of God – or the lack of (God). Our ethics flow from our theology.

It's always a dance with theology and ethics – never one without the other.

Thankfully our gospel writers taught this relationship without such heady language. They followed that compelling adage for memorable writing: show, don't tell. Be specific. And, appeal to our senses.

Today's story from Mark answers those timeless questions of theology and ethics by addressing our human needs.

Each disciple and every person who followed Jesus to hear him teach sought to experience God's presence in their world, craved security against the fears that haunted them, and to find a place of belonging to combat their loneliness. They also felt an ache in their belly for food.

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Mark tells us in this wilderness place Jesus “saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Jesus felt compassion. The term compassion, a long and silly sounding word in the original Greek, means Jesus literally felt his guts move, a visceral and undeniable sensation of being human.

His body responded to their needs. He felt compelled to serve.

This crowd and each individual within it seemed lost. They were like sheep unable to find green pastures. Sheep without a shepherd were vulnerable, were liable to getting lost and/or injured.

In this simple story, Jesus teaches them to rely upon God, to become a community, and care for one another.

It all begins by recognizing that no one feels connected within a teeming mass of people, but a group of fifty or one-hundred? You can easily learn names and recall faces. During this era a Roman military leader took its name “Centurion” from the Latin “centum” meaning one-hundred. The title identifies the leader of one-hundred soldiers.

Jesus had them sit together. With God’s blessing a few loaves and fish turned into an impossible abundance. Jesus, the good shepherd, gives each person meaning and purpose.

Mark writes of Jesus' gut-moving-emotion, compassion, in at least eight references and it is implicit throughout his ministry. Compassion leads Jesus to teach when he is weary, touch and feel the sick and injured when he would rather be alone, to feed thousands when he himself is hungry.

In the hands of humanity, at times religions grew to reject the burden of compassion by portraying God as distant and even vengeful, angry or vindictive. Their diminished god needs to be appeased. Or approachable only by an exclusive few. Both notions confine a god to human control and becomes a tool for a select few to wield as a weapon against others.

If that is your concept of God, it becomes permissible to act in equally violent ways towards others, fostering the growth of fundamentalism in any religion. Compassion is becoming almost absent when leaders decry it as mere vulnerability and malign empathy as weakness.

Others would denigrate compassion by making it synonymous with pity. No. Pity is something you can manage from afar. Compassion brings one to suffer with. Compassion's bodily sensation rises from an unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it.

It's no accident that compassion defines Jesus as one with God. Compassion is the very essence of the ancient Hebrew Story – God creates out of divine goodness and calls creation good.

Compassion then defines the prophetic tradition's path to restore the good when humanity slips away. Rabbinic scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel writes

to the prophet God does not reveal himself in absoluteness, but in personal and intimate relation to the world. God is always moved and affected by what happens in the world...it is the essence of God's moral nature: God's willingness to be intimately involved in the history of humanity.

Today we see compassion move people to become good news for others facing impossible situations.

In Springfield, Ohio, a 70-year old widow put three teddy bears and a bassinette in a back bedroom. She felt inspired by and received practical instructions from her church to welcome a Haitian mother with one-month old baby.

The termination of protective orders that permitted Haitians to live and legally work in the US is causing people to disappear from their streets, not show up for work, and refrain from school. Compassion led this typically reserved grandmother to risk providing shelter – one on one care. Those women will never forget each other's names.

At the end of January in Minneapolis, when an immigrant community stopped going to church, its pastor asked via social media for volunteers to deliver groceries to families too afraid to venture from their homes.

Reverend Amezuca thought they'd hear from ten to twenty volunteers. By 7pm that day, they received offers from 2,000 people.

The first offer came from the LGBT community – those who knew what it felt like to fear for their lives and those who set aside past discrimination from “churches” to help those in need.

As of the end of February, over 26,000 families registered for grocery and food help with 4,000 offering care.

If we ever throw the story of feeding the multitudes into the category of hyperbole or impossible, this proves otherwise.

Let me close with a quote from Reverend Amezuca, not from a sermon but a candid reply to a reporter's question:

I see God's hand in the middle of this. It's hard for me to talk about it, in the middle of this storm we've seen human beings loving other humans. I think God is just speaking to us a church that he wants us to speak to everybody and to keep preaching the truth, but in the same way that Jesus did - he was hanging out with everybody.

That's what we're doing. When you come to our church, you see Muslims, Christians, Catholics, atheists, LGBT community, everybody with one purpose: helping the neighbor, loving your neighbor as yourself. When we run out of food, I've seen people,

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without asking, they'll run into Sam's Club and get more chicken, more protein, how can you explain that? It's God.

A simple story: Jesus looks to heaven, blesses and breaks bread, and twelve disciples feed five thousand. It's the story of the impossible becoming possible. And now that story is placed in *our* hands.

Good news doesn't wait for the world to settle down. It isn't dependent on headlines or political climates. It is rooted in Christ—steady, present, and alive.

The trials of today are not new. The world has seen war, oppression, and injustice before. But every time, the light breaks through in small, stubborn acts of goodness—shelter offered, food shared, neighbors cared for, fear met with courage. Ordinary people becoming signs of God's impossible abundance.

So here is our call: Look for the person who feels lost – connect with them, maybe another fifty or one hundred.

Share what you have, even if it feels like “five loaves and two fish.”

Choose solidarity over silence. Because goodness—even in flickers—pushes back the darkness.

References

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