

Psalm 145:10-18 ~ John 6:1-21

Looking for Signs

9th Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 25, 2021

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Introduction to Scripture

I'd like to thank everyone who participated in the Rummage Sale in any way, (donating items, buying items, volunteering time, sign posting, what have you) Well done, everyone! The total sales are still being tallied, but already we know from Barb Gillespie that we are already at a record breaking high, well over the \$8,000 mark. One of my many takeaways from the last two weeks of our raving Rummage Sale rampage, is that in addition to the amazing energy and love made known in the planning, advertising, sorting, arranging, pricing, wheeling & dealing, not to mention the re-arranging, re-stocking, re-boxing, and the hauling away, is this. I was struck by how much people love to look through piles of stuff, hoping to find something of value to them.

"Surely there is something here for me, if I keep looking." While those in the business of buying and selling stuff probably know exactly what they are looking for, most of us don't. That adds to the suspense and thrill, I suppose. We love to look. We keep hoping that hidden among all this stuff, are treasures we are about to discover. Like a clothing rack that is just our height. Nadene and I had an intense, but in the end delightful, encounter with a rummage sale shopper named Bernadine, who determined she would not leave without the treasure that she found--even though we had not planned on selling it. But Nadene could see that she had found what she was looking for. And gave her a very generous price for it and the other items in her hand.

As we turn to our gospel lesson, I invite you to let that looking for treasure energy loose on John's telling of the story known as the feeding of the five thousand. It is the only miracle story told in all four gospels, and today we get to glean the treasures of John's telling. I will give you a few words and phrases to look for, you could even circle them in your bulletin if you were so inclined. They are signs that serve as compass points, locating this story in the whole arc of God's covenant that is threaded throughout our Bible. Here they are: mountain, Jesus sat down, Passover, Barley loaves, took the loaves, gave thanks, 12 baskets; In the second part of the lesson: It was now dark, sea became rough, I AM, "Do not be afraid." You have heard and seen all of these before, throughout our biblical story. What are they telling us about Jesus and about us, today? Let us partake in the God's holy, nourishing word as we hear John 6:1-21.

Sermon

What signs did *you* see? Signs can be easy to miss. My dad was red/green color blind. At least that was his excuse for all the stop signs he didn't see. And my mom would be quick on the draw to point out: "Full stop, honey, just ahead." Signs can be easy to miss, even when we are looking for them. And even when those who love us are trying to point them out to us. In this story we just heard—both in the feeding of the five thousand *and* in Jesus walking on the water toward his disciples in the storm, we are given flurry of signs flashing, calling us to see Jesus, the true sign. Jesus is the manna from God for all who are open to receive him. A sign of God's provision, God's presence, God's disproportionate and surprising grace for all, and especially

those on the margins. Barley bread is what poor people ate. Poor people in those days rarely, if ever, got their fill. They were usually walking around feeling hungry. Until Jesus came along that day. Jesus is God's manna from heaven. In this telling, Jesus is the one who feeds everyone, rather than the disciples. This signature event also teaches us that Jesus, our Savior, is all about multiplication and not division. We will talk more about the meanings of these signs next Sunday as we continue in John 6. For today, let's recall that a sign in the Bible is an act, any act, that points to the redeeming activity of God.

Like rummaging for treasures at a rummage sale, we may love to rummage for signs. But how do we tell which are the true signs of God's redeeming activity, the true signature of Jesus in and among us, and which are not? Learning to look for true signs and deciphering which are false, can be very difficult. There is so much information and misinformation out there. So many convincing voices shouting for our attention. Signs that can lead to life or death.

Alabama Doctor Brytney Cobia, on Monday, said that all but one of her recent COVID patients did not receive the vaccine. The vaccinated patient, just needed a little oxygen and is expected to fully recover, some of the others are dying. Dr. Cobia said that after a loved one dies of COVID, "I hug their family members and I tell them the best way to honor their loved one is to go get vaccinated and encourage everyone they know to do the same. They cry. And they tell me they didn't know. They thought it was a hoax. They thought it was political. They thought it was 'just the flu.'" She spoke of how seeing them face-to-face changed her whole perspective. She realized that just like people who chose to be vaccinated, "they are also people who think they made the best decision that they could with the information that they have. And now all you really see is their fear and their regret... I see a person that's really suffering and so regretful for the choice that they made..."

For people who are hesitant to receive the vaccine, "Dr. Cobia recommends speaking to their primary care physician. She said when she gets a new COVID patient that's unvaccinated, she asks them why they haven't gotten the vaccine. She said most of them are very honest and give answers. They will say 'I talked to this person, I saw this thing on Facebook, I got this email, I saw this on the news—those are the reasons I didn't get vaccinated. She asks them if they made an appointment with their primary care doctor and ask them their opinion. "And so far, nobody has answered yes to that question."i

When we are looking for signs and signals of how best to care for our bodies, I think we all know our most trust worthy source of good information is to go to our primary care physician. They have expert training in medicine, and they know you and your body. When we are looking for signs and signals, looking for direction on our spiritual health, we look to God and God's Word, we look and listen to Jesus. We trust God: God of all creation, gracious and merciful, who has compassion over all that God has made. We look to Jesus, the I AM who took on human form, Jesus our Redeemer. Jesus is sometimes called "the great physician" who knows all of humanity and knows each of us intimately. Better than we know ourselves.

God is the one who cares for the hungry and the despairing. This two-part story, of Jesus feeding the hungry bread, and giving the anxious disciples peace in the storm signifies this truth. While Covid-19 has caused the largest decline in U.S. life expectancy since WWII, it is not the only reason for this historic downturn in life expectancy here in our nation. In the second half of the 2010's the number of "deaths of despair," that is deaths caused by suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse have sky-rocketed. People dying because they have not seen and heard and known the truth in the core of their being what we heard in Psalm 145, "The Lord upholds all who are falling...The Lord is near to all who call on him." They have not experienced the miracle of being fed until they were satisfied with the spiritual food that gives them heart strength and the will to carry on. Howard Thurman has written, "This idea—that God is mindful of the individual—is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease. In this world the socially disadvantaged individual is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: "Who am I? What am I?"ⁱⁱ

This power, this new courage, this new fearlessness, rises up and multiplies, miraculously. And yet, this spiritual power, as much as we would like to click on it and put it in our electronic shopping cart, or grab it before someone else does at the rummage sale, alas: this mystical power cannot be held or contained. The risen Christ, you may recall, in John 20, when Mary Magdalene all of a sudden recognizes him in the garden at the front of the empty tomb, she must have tried to hold him in her arms because he said, "Do not hold on to me." (John 20:17) Here in today's story where John tells of Jesus walking on the water in the storm toward the disciples in the boat, we read, "they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going." (John 6:21) In the seeing of him, in the hearing of his voice, his "I AM, do not be afraid," was the sign. It was nearness, not possession. Not holding, grabbing. Near presence in the midst, not possession.

We want to take Jesus into our boat, enlisting Jesus in our causes. But in this story, we are being taught that the nearness of Jesus is not the same as physical possession. We are not given signs to possess and hold onto them forever. Just before worship, we had the joy of baptizing 5-week-old Lily Halina Siorek. And we also shared the sadness of bidding the Siorek family farewell as they prepare to move to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This summer we've had to say goodbye to two other dear FPC families who are in the process of moving to St. Louis: Patricia Silva & Carlos Herrera; and the Anderson family who have just moved to Madison. I would rather hold onto them, have them stay here forever. But that is not God's way.

We are promised God's provision and Christ's presence. And with that promise I hear us being called to loosen our grip as an act of faith. Whether that grip is on a person or family or that grip is on a particular mindset of how things have got to happen. Or maybe that grip is a desperate, fearful hold on a habit, a tradition, or a habit of mind. I hear Jesus calling us to be ready to let go, if needed. At that moment listen for the voice, look for the signs of Jesus who says, "I AM, do not be afraid." Jesus, who will lead you to your new destination, even when you are in the eye of the storm.

Last Tuesday night, the Milwaukee Bucks become NBA champions for the first time in 50 years by defeating the Phoenix Suns 105-98 in Game 6. About their MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo, who scored 50 points, grabbed 14 rebounds and blocked five shots in that final game—the journalist, Louis Zatzman, wrote: “neither injury nor gravity could hold him down.” The same could be said of 2016 Olympic gold gymnast phenomenon, Simone Biles. As we look forward to her performance at the Tokyo Olympics, when we get to watch her defy gravity like no gymnast before her, it seems as though *neither injury nor gravity can hold her down*, either. On her body she has a tattoo that reads, “*And still I rise*,” from Maya Angelou’s poem written in 1978 titled, “Still I rise.”

I raise the names and stories of these two athletes this morning, because—well, they are both very exciting to think and talk about, but more importantly because of this. Being people who rise above injury and even gravity itself, I see them as signs that point to the power of the resurrection. Although we can’t shoot hoops like Giannis, or vault through the air like Simone, the power of the resurrection is offered by Jesus to us all. To each of us, as Jesus gave bread to each person in that crowd of 5,000 or more, Jesus gives us the power to rise above injury and all the forces of gravity that threaten to drag us down. In our own way and time. Still, each of us can rise.

Our invitation here is to look for the signs of Christ: where there is multiplication, and not division, God is there. Where all are honored, fed, and satisfied, God is there. When we are in the midst of the storm, in the darkest valley, Jesus is near us, telling us to “Fear not.” While some of us may be red/green color blind, like my dad was. All of us have our own forms of blindness. That is why we need to keep looking for the signs, remembering that neither injury or gravity held our Lord and Savior, our manna from heaven, Jesus, the Christ.

*O God, gather me now to be with you as you are with me.
Soothe my tiredness; quiet my fretfulness; relieve my compulsiveness;
let me be easy for a moment.
O Lord, release me from the fears and guilts which grip me so tightly;
from the expectations and opinions which I so tightly grip,
that I may be open to receiving what you give, to risking something genuinely new,
to learning something refreshingly different.
O God, gather me to be with you
as you are with me.ⁱⁱⁱ*

ⁱ Dennis Pillion, www.al.com posted July 21, 2021

ⁱⁱ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Friends United Press: 1981), pp. 39-40, as quoted in CAC.org, July 23, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (Luramedia: San Diego, CA, 1984), from his prayer, “Gather Me To Be With You,” pp. 70-71.