



Weekly Study
Week 5: Miracles and the Feeding of the 5,000
Read Mark 6:30-44

This lesson is about two things:

- 1) The story of the feeding of the 5,000 found in the Gospel of Mark
- 2) Miracles in Scripture, particularly those other than the healings we discussed last week

When you read the accounts of miracles in Scripture, of moments when God's sovereign will and power seem to supersede the laws of nature, what do you think and feel? What impact does the story of Jesus walking on the water have on you? Do these narratives prompt belief and faith in you? Or do the miracle passages raise in you mostly skepticism and doubt?

It is ironic that since the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the accounts of miracles in Scripture have served exactly the opposite function they did in the centuries before that. For centuries, the purpose of the miracles in the account of Scripture was to authenticate God's authority and ongoing presence and activity in the world. Indeed, if we believe God is the author of all creation, certainly God can move in ways counter to the nature God created. But now, as we have come to understand these natural laws, we find that the Biblical claims that run counter to those laws raise our suspicions about their veracity. In this lesson, we will take a look at the function these miracles served for those who experienced them, for those who read about them in the early community of faith, and for us today. But first, let's take a look at one particular miracle.

The Feeding of the Multitude

Remember, Jesus has been teaching in Galilee, operating out of Capernaum. Here is a little narrative list of geography based on Mark's gospel:

- Mark 1:21 – 4:34: Jesus does all of his teaching in and around Capernaum and “by the sea.”
- Mark 4:35-41: Jesus takes his disciples in a boat “to the other side.” He calms the storm.
- Mark 5:1-20: Jesus casts out the demon in the Geresenes, and word spreads in the Decapolis (a region of ten roman city-states on the eastern side of the sea of Galilee).
- Mark 5:21-43: teaching and healing again in Galilee.

- Mark 6: 1-6: Jesus goes back to Nazareth, hometown, where he is rejected.
- Mark 6:6-13: Jesus sends out the twelve apostles.
- Mark 6:14-29: Death of John the Baptist by Herod.
- Mark 6:30-44: Feeding of the Multitude (5,000) near Gennesaret, SW of Capernaum.
- Mark 6:45-52: Disciples go to Bethsaida “on the other side,” and on the way back he walks on water.

"The Feeding of the 5,000", is the only miracle (apart from the resurrection) which is recorded in all four canonical gospels: Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:5-15. Additionally, there is a second similar or parallel miracle, the "Feeding of the 4,000", with seven loaves of bread and fish, which is reported by Matthew 15:32-16:10 and Mark 8:1-9, but not by Luke or John. This multiplication of the loaves is clearly a very important component of the narrative of Jesus life.

- 1) **Mark 6:30-34a – The gathering of the crowds.** By now, great crowds are following Jesus. In the first verses of Mark 6, he is rejected in Nazareth, his hometown. And the Pharisees and the Herodians—these were religious and governmental leaders—are threatened by him, and we have heard in Mark 3 that they were plotting to destroy him. But we have just read in Mark 5 that the people throughout the Decapolis are hearing all about him, because of his casting out of the demon, and people from Tyre and Sidon and all about are coming to see him. It appears Jesus and the disciples are becoming overwhelmed. He has tried to deal with this pressure by sending out his twelve apostles to heal and to teach, but the people are still chasing him in droves. He and his disciples try to get away from the crowds for a little rest and recharging, but the people follow them. Throughout the Gospel of Mark particularly, we see these gathering crowds, this populist movement for Jesus. In later lessons, we will see how Jesus will turn toward Jerusalem, and he will predict his own suffering and death. It is important to remember that neither the Romans nor the Herodians nor the Pharisees killed Jesus because he taught people to love one another. They killed him because he had gathered such a following that threatened their power, and threatened their orthodoxy.

One of the techniques that we sometimes use when teaching the Bible is to ask students to close their eyes and listen, and choose characters with whom they identify. When I read through the whole gospel, I sadly find myself connecting with the Pharisees. They want to do right, to protect the status quo. As more and more people begin to follow Jesus, they see a threat to the institution to which they have given their lives, a community and way of life which they believe is God ordained. And they determine that for the sake of the people themselves, the Pharisees must protect their religion from this charlatan seeking to overturn their order and their orthodoxy.

- 2) **Mark 6:34a-37: The compassion and call of Jesus.** When the disciples see the crowds, they find the crowds to be overwhelming and exhausting. I can identify with that. I think many of us find the Christian life, a life of service to others, to be overwhelming. No matter how many people you care for, there always seem to be more of them. Sometimes, you want to say, “send them away so they can get something to eat.” But in contrast to the seeming annoyance or avoidance that the disciples exhibit, Jesus responds with compassion. This is true in all of the six narratives in the feeding of the multitudes. One might ask, “Why does Jesus multiply the fishes and the loaves?”

Very simply... because the people are hungry. Jesus cares about us, including our physical needs. Feeding the hungry is one thing he came to do.

Additionally, note that Jesus does not say, "I will feed them. I will take care of it." Instead, Jesus says, "you give them something to eat." And the text doesn't say that the disciples had compassion on the crowd. No, the call of Jesus comes from the compassion of Jesus, not the disciples. We are to act because he has compassion, not just because we do. Sometimes, we develop "compassion fatigue" and our own compassion fades. Too bad. Your weariness, Mr. or Ms. Disciple, is trumped by the compassion of Jesus. It is his compassion that calls you to action. You give them something to eat.

- 3) **The miraculous provision of Jesus** So, Jesus takes what they have, and by his miraculous power, what they have becomes not only enough, but more than enough. We who are apostles, sent by Jesus to do his work, usually feel like we are not enough. I often feel "not enough." But when we take stock of what we have, and let God touch it and use it, it becomes more than enough.

You may have already noticed the tie between this passage and one familiar to many Christians, the Last Supper. "*While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them...*" (Mark 14:22). It is the same formula given here in the feeding of the multitude. That is what God does with our efforts at service. He blesses us. He breaks us. And he gives us away. And when that happens, we are enough!

The purpose of miracle narratives

First, the miracles inspire belief. Isn't it the New Testament claim that Jesus is the Son of God and that the Son of God is really God incarnate? And if someone were really the Son of God, wouldn't he be able to heal the sick? Wouldn't God be able to feed the hungry? Wouldn't it be the case that God would be able to countermand the way nature works? Wouldn't the creator have power over the very creation he made? Of course, if I saw Jesus walk on water, or raise the dead, or take the a few loaves of bread and feed a multitude, I would believe! And if I were reading the story in Jerusalem a hundred years later, and was trying to decide whether Jesus was the promised Messiah, I would want to hear stories that reminded me of Moses and Elijah before I signed on that he would be my king. I would want to read accounts that Jesus was more than a mere man.

For us today, the Biblical stories of miracles seldom lead people to believe in Christ. For the seeker, the stories usually lead people to view the Scripture as just another mythology from two millennia ago. We are prone to dismiss them. Thomas Jefferson is known to have created a Bible, titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which he used a razor to remove all stories from the gospels of miracles or anything supernatural, including the resurrection. While few of us would go to such lengths, we are tempted to simply pass over them as vestiges of a different age. Two things can really change that:

- 1) **If we experience something particularly miraculous personally, the Biblical stories validate our experience as real and point us to believe in the Biblical God who works miracles.** A man I know was told his cancer would give him only a few months to live, and he has lived 60 years since that day. That miracle led him to turn to Scripture. For him, the Biblical miracles remind him that he is a part of an ongoing story of God who is at work in the world around him.

- 2) **If we look through the eyes of faith, the miracles can strengthen the belief of those who already believe.** Jesus has a phrase he uses when teaching in the gospels: “Those who have eyes to see, let them see.” Most of us will interpret the world based on what we already believe, and find evidence to support that claim in everything around us, including what we hear and read. I find it interesting that in the gospels, the Pharisees and the disciples all see many of the same miracles, but they come to very different conclusions. Because the disciples already believe, the miracles they witness strengthen their belief. But the Pharisees’ and Sanhedrin have hardened hearts, so no miracle will lead them to embrace Jesus as the Messiah. There is too much for them to lose.

However, it is important to note that for this very reason, Jesus never wants to use miracles to demonstrate God’s power. Dr. Timothy Keller writes, “Jesus’ miracles in particular were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce. You never see Him say something like: ‘See that tree over there? Watch me make it burst into flames!’” (Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God*. New York: Dutton, 2008. p. 96.) Those who wish to turn the miraculous power of God into a circus sideshow have misunderstood the function of this power. In fact, in many places in the gospel, Jesus seems to want to keep people from choosing to believe just because he is working these miracles. In contrast with the Gospel of John, where the first half of the gospel is a series of seven miraculous signs (beginning with changing water to wine and concluding with raising Lazarus from the dead), the three synoptic gospels show Jesus reluctant for the word to get out...at least not yet. He often tells people to keep quiet about the miracles they have experienced, because it is not time yet for others to believe in him. In all three of the synoptic gospels, we find a narrative in which the Pharisees come to him and ask “for a sign” that he is the Messiah and the kingdom of God has come. He refuses to give them such a sign: “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (Matthew 16:4. See also Matthew 16:1-4, Mark 8:11-13, Luke 11:29-32). The sign of Jonah is a reference to the crucifixion and resurrection, which led to the repentance of Nineveh. The miracle that Jesus wants us to claim is the resurrection! This is the one that will be the telling one. This is the one that will really inspire belief.

Second, the miracles inspire not so much belief, but awe and wonder! I think I was six or seven years old when I first saw Charlton Heston play Moses in the Ten Commandments. I was amazed by the parting of the Red Sea. I was a little terrified of the water of the Nile turning into blood. The hail of fire that fell down upon Egypt made me tremble and cheer at the same time. The miracles depicted in the movie had their desired effect. I was a child in awe and wonder. Cecile B. DeMille was a master, and the movie won the Academy Award for best visual effects in 1957.

Ann Lamott writes about awe and wonder, as one of the three basic prayers of humanity: help, thanks, and wow.

When we are stunned to the place beyond words, we’re finally starting to get somewhere. It is so much more comfortable to think that we know what it all means, what to expect and how it all hangs together. When we are stunned to the place beyond words, when an aspect of life takes us away from being able to chip away at something until it’s down to a manageable size and then to file it nicely away, when all we can say in response is “Wow,” that’s a prayer. (Lamott, Anne. Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. p. 73.)

Dr. Andy Tix points out that this sense of awe and wonder is a basic thread throughout Scripture. “There are 53 references to ‘awe,’ 92 to ‘amazing,’ 22 to ‘astonish,’ 38 to ‘reverence,’ and 109 to ‘wonder.’ Related words such as ‘fear,’ ‘afraid,’ and ‘tremble’ also are frequently mentioned in the Bible, and sometimes—but not always—refer to awe experiences.”

I love to go see the cathedrals of Europe. These structures, built over the centuries, were constructed to inspire awe. When you walk in, you hold your head down a bit lower, whisper your words to one another, and find yourself silenced by just how big and beautiful everything is. You see icons and statues you don’t understand, and decide that they must be important, but that their significance is somehow over your head. The God we discover in these edifices is a *transcendent* God, above and beyond us. In the last decades, however, we have focused on the *immanent* God, the Jesus that is right here beside us. We brought the ceilings down lower, put carpet on the floors, pads in the pews (or even brought in chairs), painted the rooms mauve and teal and put potted plants in the corner. We figuratively said “C’mon in. Make yourself comfortable. Jesus is your friend. He loves you. No need to tremble.” I must confess my own theological bent is to make Jesus more accessible. But the miracle narratives of Scripture remind us that we cannot reduce God to someone we can easily understand, that can be explained with overly simplified theological construct. No, Jesus transcends our theology, and the miracle stories demonstrate that Jesus supersedes even nature itself. And when we get that, we find ourselves saying “wow,” and falling down to worship.

Finally, the miracles are a demonstration that Jesus came to put the world right again, to bring about the kingdom of God. It is not that Jesus wants to use these miracles to convince, but their existence shows the world God’s agenda, and what God is intending to do in Jesus. They provide evidence that the kingdom of God is overtaking the kingdom of the world, that God is restoring God’s creation. They are evidence that the kingdom of God is not simply a spiritual kingdom, in which we die and go to heaven, but that the reign of God is to take place here on the earth as well, and we get to be a part of that. Our king reigns over nature as well as over the hearts of human beings.

Again, Dr. Timothy Keller explains:

We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible tells us that God did not originally make the world to have disease, hunger, and death in it. Jesus has come to redeem where it is wrong and heal the world where it is broken. His miracles are not just proofs that He has power but also wonderful foretastes of what He is going to do with that power. Jesus’ miracles are not just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.” (Keller, Timothy. The Reason for God. New York: Dutton, 2008. p. 96.)

This is part of what Jesus came to do. Not only does he save us from our sins, but he puts the world right too. Why does Jesus multiply the loaves? Because he sees people who are hungry and wants to feed them. Why does Jesus calm the sea when the disciples are afraid they will perish? Because he sees their fear, and cares about them, and wants them to understand that he rules over nature too.

And that work of putting things right still goes on today. So why are there still disease and floods and tornados? Because God is not yet finished. We live in the time in between, and the miracles of which we read, or which we experience, are simply a foretaste. The work of fixing a broken world did not end with

Jesus. We read in Scripture of miracles done by the apostles and by Paul. In the first description of the early church, Luke writes *“everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.”* (Acts 2:43) Later, in a council meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem, Paul is making his case that the Christian faith should extend to the Gentile community, and *“the whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.”* (Acts 15:12)

I must admit that I have never experienced firsthand a miracle that seemed supernatural. Perhaps my vision is too skeptical. But that does not mean I have not experienced events that fulfill Biblical purpose of the miraculous events of Scripture. I have seen the hungry fed in ways one would not believe possible, as God’s people share with others what God has given them. I have seen the sick healed in hospital rooms, through God’s hands in the midst of medical teams. I can see that Christ is at work redeeming and restoring creation as he meant it to be. And that brings me to my knees in awe and wonder. It makes me say wow. And it makes me believe all the more that God is sovereign, and Jesus is Lord. And isn’t that the point of miracles anyway?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What stories immediately precede and follow the feeding of the 5,000 miracle in Mark? Do you think that is significant?
2. What were Jesus and the disciples doing when crowds confronted them?
3. Do you find yourself identifying with the disciples or the crowd in this story? Do you ever think of yourself as a Pharisee?
4. Underline in your Bible the verbs that describe Jesus’ actions with the bread. Do you ever feel blessed, broken, given? What kind of response does that elicit in you?
5. How much food was left over compared to how much they started with?
6. Do you ever feel like you are not enough? Do you ever have “compassion fatigue?”
7. Have you ever experienced firsthand something that you believe was miraculous? Describe it?
8. Which of the following best describes your reaction to miracle stories in the Bible:
 - a. They lead me to believe even more than I did before.
 - b. They lead me to be more skeptical about the Bible.
 - c. I believe they happened then, but doubt they still happen.
 - d. other...
9. What makes you say “wow” and inspires you to worship God?



Daily Readings

Week 5: Miracles and the Feeding of the 5,000

Week 5, Day 1

Mark 6:30-44

Commentary: Some scholars have pointed out similarities in the way Jesus takes, blesses, and breaks the loaves to the Last Supper meal. The message of Jesus meeting the physical needs of the crowd should not be overlooked here. Christ came with the transformative message of the new covenant, but that message does not inhibit Jesus' compassion to address our daily physical needs as well. During the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus empowers his disciples to join in the process of gathering the food reminding us that God uses humans to help bring about God's great purposes.

Reflection Question: How might God be employing you to join in the miraculous work that God is doing this week?

Week 5, Day 2

Matthew 14:22-33

Commentary: The previous miracle (the feeding of the 5,000) assured the disciples that they were following one who could abundantly provide for their needs. Here they learn that Jesus can protect and empower them as well. Peter expresses "little faith" because he allows the external circumstances of the storm to overcome him, as though God did not exercise power over the wind. The disciples were "terrified" at seeing Jesus walking on the water. Fear can paralyze us, but the message of Jesus is, "take heart for I am with you always."

Reflection Question: When was the last time you felt the storms of life crashing into you? Were you able to fix your gaze on Christ or did God seem far away from you?

Week 5, Day 3

Luke 8:22-25

Commentary: Jesus was asleep when the storm broke; the fact that Jesus sleeps attests to his true humanity. The storm went to sleep when Jesus spoke; this fact attests to his absolute deity. Again we see an example of the disciples being controlled by their fear, they need not have worried for the master of the ocean, earth, and skies was with them. What Jesus did to calm the Sea of Galilee, he can do for his troubled, storm-tossed followers today.

Reflection Question: The disciples were afraid and in awe of the power of Jesus Christ; has there ever been a time in your life when you were in awe of the power of God?

Week 5, Day 4

Luke 5:1-11

Commentary: After Jesus uses the boat to address a large crowd, he confronts the professional need of the fishermen who have been toiling all night with little success. Simon's address of Jesus as "Master" implies a servant-lord relationship. This reference is only used in Luke; in parallel passages, the gospels of Matthew and Mark employ "Teacher" or "Rabbi." This may reveal some perspective about the motives of the gospel writer of Luke. When Peter sees the miracle he is immediately struck by his own sinfulness, suggesting that when we witness the glory of God we are compelled towards repentance.

Reflection Question: When Jesus calls the disciples they are going about the work of their vocation. Jesus then turns their work into work for God by overflowing their nets. How might God be calling you to entrust your vocation into a divine calling for Christ? What would God's provision look like in your career?

Week 5, Day 5

Luke 8:40-56

Commentary: The healing of the woman suffering from hemorrhages and the resurrection of Jairus' daughter are contrasted in interesting ways. The woman was an outcast in society because of her ailment, while Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue. The woman was healed by her actions and faith, while Jairus' daughter was resurrected by Christ's words to "get up!" From these two miracles we can see that the power of Jesus to heal and save is not limited to class or status, and Jesus need not follow a similar pattern when healing or performing miracles.

Reflection Question: When Jesus tells the family that the child is not dead they laugh at him because they are certain that she had died. When have you trusted the wisdom of humanity over the word of God? Are there things about Jesus that you know you should believe as a Christian but still find difficult to believe?