

In addition to preaching the texts as they appear in our Year of the Bible reading schedule, I’m trying to preach texts that don’t ever appear in the lectionary. Some of the texts we’ve heard have been, quite frankly, weird, and it is easy to see why they didn’t make the lectionary, even if they are still God’s word to us. Some of the texts didn’t make the lectionary because a similar story from a different book was chosen instead. That’s our situation today.

This passage from Mark sounds familiar because there are similar versions in other gospels. But this particular passage never shows up in our 3 year lectionary cycle. And it is a long section, so we’ll break it down. Feel free to open your bibles and follow along as we put this all together.

The first section is the second feeding miracle Mark describes—two chapters earlier, Jesus had also fed a crowd. So his disciples, theoretically, should have been ready, the second time around, when Jesus started asking them how much food they had in their picnic baskets. But they ask, “how can you feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

Jesus, despite the lack of comprehension of the disciples, does his thing and feeds 4,000 people with seven loaves of bread.

And, immediately, he and his disciples get in a boat and leave. Scholars aren’t sure where Dalmanutha was located, but when Jesus got there, the religious leaders ask him for a sign from heaven to test him. One might think that two feeding miracles might count as a possible sign, but apparently not. I don’t know how long Jesus had planned to stay on that side of the Galilee, but they get back in the boat and head back to the other side. Perhaps when faced with such unbelief, Jesus realized his time could be better spent elsewhere.

But then the feeding miracle, and the Pharisees request for signs, takes on new importance because the disciples forgot to bring more than one loaf of bread with them in the boat!

But Jesus reply is not to take the bread, bless it, and feed everyone in the boat. Instead he says, “beware the yeast of the Pharisee and the yeast of Herod”.

Mark 8:1-26
January 24, 2010

Marci Auld Glass
“So Much to See”

Southminster

The disciples turn to each other and say, “he’s upset with us because we forgot to bring bread on the boat!”

Jesus says, “what? bread? What are you talking about? Why are you talking about bread?”

Poor disciples.

“Well, Jesus. There was that whole feeding thing you just did on the other side of the lake. And now we’re in a boat and don’t have much food with us and we’re kinda hungry. And you just mentioned yeast. So that’s why we’re talking about bread.”

We’re like the disciples most of the time, I think. We get so bogged down in the anxiety of the details of the moment that we don’t see bigger things around us. Yes, there are bigger things going on around us, but what are we going to have for lunch?!!

Jesus says, “Do you still not understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? So you not remember?”

He wants the disciples to respond differently than the Pharisees. He wants them to realize that signs of God’s abundance are everywhere around them. They just need to open their hearts, open their eyes, and open their ears. He wants them to see that the miracles aren’t just in turning seven loaves into food for 4,000. The miracle of God’s abundance is visible all around us—if only we have hearts open to receive, eyes open to see, and ears to hear.

And nothing closes our hearts, eyes, and ears faster than anxiety and doubt. When you close your heart to the people around you, you will feel very isolated. When you look around the world and expect to see scarcity, you will. When you listen for despair and hopelessness, you will hear it.

The Pharisees had neither eyes to see or ears to hear stories of God’s abundance and presence. They had determined that they were the judges of where God was working in the world and demanded a sign from Jesus. But the reality is, they wouldn’t have seen any possible sign he would have given them. Because their hearts were closed. Their eyes were closed. Their ears were closed.

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There is a similar scene in the final book of CS Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia series, “The Last Battle”. As the Narnians are fighting their final battle, their world has been divided by characters who spread falsehoods and lies. And so, some of the characters decide they won’t believe in anything. The dwarves say that “it is the dwarves for the dwarves” and not for anyone else.

After the battle, a number of characters, including the dwarves, are in a paradise, or perhaps even heavenly place. Their health is returned. The air is clean and clear. The fruit on the trees is better than the best fruit they’ve ever had. And Aslan the Christ-like lion is there too. But the dwarves don’t see any of it. They think they are still in a stable. Here’s a passage from the book:

“Well if that doesn’t beat everything” said the dwarf. “How can you go on talking all that rot? Your wonderful Lion didn’t come and help you, did he? Thought not. And now—even now—when you’ve been beaten and shoved into this (stable), just the same as the rest of us, you’re still at your old game. Starting a new lie! Trying to make us believe we’re none of us shut up, and it ain’t dark, and heaven knows what.”

The followers of Aslan regroup when they realize they can’t make the dwarves see, hear, or sense the truth. They ask Aslan to do something for them. He says, “I will show you what I can, and what I cannot do.” He came close to the dwarves and gave a long growl; low, but it set all the air shaking. But the dwarves said to one another, ‘hear that? That’s the gang at the other end of the stable, trying to frighten us. Don’t take any notice. They won’t take us in again!’

“Aslan raised his head and shook his mane. Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the dwarves knees: pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn’t much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear they couldn’t taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable.”

Eventually, the dwarves get in a fight because each one is convinced that the others have better food than he does. After the fight, one says, “At least we haven’t let anyone take us in. The dwarves are for the dwarves.”

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“You see,” said Aslan. “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.” (C S Lewis, The Last Battle selections from pp145-148 (Collier, NY 1980)).

Like the dwarves that do not recognize Aslan when he is standing in their presence, so too do the Pharisees miss seeing Jesus. They want a sign, and God has given them a sign and that sign is Jesus Christ. But they don’t recognize him even when he’s in their presence.

And Jesus wants to make sure that his Disciples have more sense than that. He wants to make sure they are using their senses better than that.

So Jesus gives his disciples a teachable moment. “Do you not remember? When I broke the 5 loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?”

“Twelve”.

“And the seven for the 4,000—how many baskets full of leftovers then?”

“seven”.

“Do you not yet understand?”

I think the clear answer to Jesus on that question is “no, Jesus. We don’t.”

But I think what he’s trying to tell them, trying to tell us, with his questions, is that our worries about not having enough bread in the boat completely miss the point—in each of those situations, scarcity—the worry that you don’t have enough, that you aren’t enough—scarcity is shattered by the abundance of Christ. A few loaves become so much food you’re searching for baskets in which to put the leftovers.

Jesus is calling his disciples to have eyes to see that abundance around them. To remember those moments when the myth of scarcity and anxiety are shattered by abundant grace and love.

But you have to have eyes to see. Like the dwarves in CS Lewis’ book, who are sitting in paradise and think they are in a stable, God can only

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lead us so far. God can only provide the abundance. We have to be the ones to recognize it, to see it.

So then our text ends with a healing in Bethsaida. A nameless blindman is brought to Jesus. The question Jesus asks him midway through the healing is "can you see anything?"

And Jesus asks us the same question.

Can you see anything?

Do you understand?

This particular healing takes place in stages. At first glance, you wonder if Jesus did it wrong the first time and had to try again. But I think we should see the steps in this healing as a metaphor for the process it takes us to see things clearly. The man can only see partly at first. He can see people, but not with any detail. So Jesus touches him again, the man looks hard, and his sight is restored.

In this particular healing, in light of the text that has come before it, it seems that sight is also a metaphor for insight. It is a reminder for us, perhaps, that even if we have 20/20 vision, we still have to look intently, as the man in Bethsaida did, to really see clearly. The people without sight in this text are probably the Pharisees, and perhaps even the Disciples at some moments.

As you look around your world this week, keep your eyes open for signs of God's abundance. I don't mean piles of money lying in the road. But look for gifts and blessings, even in the midst of any spiritual or physical hunger or anxiety you may be feeling.

If you listen to the stories from Haiti these past weeks, there are people who have lost everything. everything. And yet, they gather in the streets and praise God for life. For water shared by neighbors. For food, however they find it.

And you don't have to go to Haiti to see this. I see it every day. People in hospitals, who have all sorts of reasons for despair, yet see blessings in their lives.

My prayer this week is that we all may have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts open to receive the abundant blessings of God. Amen.