

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

“Choose Life”

In first century Israel during the time of today's Holy Gospel, things were less than good. There was faulty leadership, both the government leaders and the religious leaders. People were living under the thumb of the Romans, there was a lack of faith, but on the other hand there were also miracles and signs of hope. The evidence of this hope is there - all we have to do is check the Gospel of Mark, in chapter 6, which we have been hearing during the last few weeks. We learn that the people of Israel were walking around “*like sheep without a shepherd.*” They were longing for deliverance from their struggles. Jesus saw that they were spiritually hungry and thirsting for words of righteousness, but these starving people had no faithful, spiritual pastors to feed them with knowledge and understanding. The Scribes and Pharisees were supposed to lead them and guide them, but these men, who claimed to be their shepherds, were blinded by their own sin and their own self-righteousness. These “spiritual leaders” were not leaders at all, but were men who were out only for their own monetary gain and for the people to exalt them and give reverence for the position that they held. Sadly, because they had no true shepherds, the people of Israel were dying from a starvation for the truth. They got no spiritual food given to them in their synagogues. Their king was off in one of his many luxurious palaces carousing with his cohorts, lusting after women, and beheading prophets. These people were desperate for true leadership, and they were left destitute and hopeless - there seemed to be no way out for them.

And then into their lives walks the Man from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth. Suddenly in their very midst is a teacher, a preacher, a rabbi, a minister, a prophet and someone who came upon them like a “breath of fresh air” to the hungry souls and hopeless existence that they were living. Jesus' reputation had spread like wildfire throughout the region. His name had become well known and everyone could tell that **this man was different**. He was not just some scribe who only cared for His own fortune. This man named Jesus (Yeshua which means ‘salvation’) was different. He was a man who showed that He had compassion; a man who had answers for their questions, and more importantly - here was a man who actually practiced what He preached. His words were powerful, informative and refreshing to one's soul. His words brought hope and a newness of life that every person longed for. He “**walked the talk**” and so they followed Him – sometimes relentlessly – chasing before Him so that they would be there before He arrived.

Have you ever been in a situation where you just needed a break? Maybe you needed to get away from it all – to have a little peace and solitude – and a chance to “recharge your batteries?” The disciples had just returned from being sent out “two by two.” You remember Jesus told them to “*shake the dust off*” if their message was not well received and they were to bring nothing with them in order to show their faith to those they came in contact with? Well, at this point they really needed to get away, they were pooped to put it plainly, and so they got into a boat to get some “alone time” with Jesus. But it seemed that the **people's need** was **greater than theirs** and so the people followed the disciples to get where they were going

before the boat did! There would be no break, no rest for the weary, so to speak. You can just imagine the disciples' frustration and exasperation.

All four of the Gospels give a very detailed account of the miraculous event that was to come, that conveyed the compassion and love of Jesus – and His willingness to provide for those who are His followers. This was a perfect example of Jesus' desire to reach out in love and to use His power to benefit others – for no other reason than His love and compassion for them. Jesus told His disciples to stop worrying about getting rid of the people – and He told them: "*You give them something to eat.*" Jesus insisted that the disciples find out what bread was available, to check and see what might be back at the boat or also from the crowd. The disciples returned with the answer: there were only five loaves of bread and two fish. The Gospel of John tells us that they were five small barley loaves and two small fish – belonging to a young boy. Jesus emphasized the word YOU in order to remind the disciples to start with what YOU'VE got before you ask God to give you more. By telling them "*You give them something to eat*" and given that a denarius equaled a day's wages, so two hundred denarii would be enough to feed the crowd, I believe that Jesus was stressing the sheer impossibility of their doing this for the whole crowd and that it was probably more than their resources could cover.

It was spring time, because we are told that the grass was green – and that only happens in the spring time when there is rain and the melting of the snow peaks in the mountains. The water is abundant at that time – (the Jordan River overflows) - and so there is green grass. The rains stop in May and so later in the year it is scorched, dried, and brown. The people sat on the green grass in groups of hundreds, and fifty. It was probably near the time of Passover – which is important because this is quite reminiscent of the miracle that God performed daily for the Israelites in the wilderness – providing manna for their survival. Jesus had them sit in groups pointing back to Exodus 18 when Moses chose leaders of people in groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

If you recall, the disciples had just returned from their "road trip," being empowered to heal and perform miracles on their "two by two" journey. I think it is important for us to remember that **this incredible miracle took place in Jesus' own hands and not in the hands of the disciples.** You see, **whatever we give to Him, He can bless and multiply.** Isn't it remarkable for us to have a Lord and Savior who can solve our every problem, meet our every need, and then enable us to minister to others – just as that day on the Galilee two thousand years ago?

Oh how I wish we could have been there and seen Jesus as He gave the customary Jewish blessing over the loaves and the fish. He most probably prayed "*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam, ha'motzi lehem min ha-aretz.*" "*Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.*"

The remarkable and wonderful thing is that the blessing was not of the food, but of God who gave it! Jesus looked up to heaven, trusting in the Father for a miraculous provision of food.

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2015, Year B

Then He broke the loaves into pieces, divided the fish into portions, and **gave**, (which in the Greek imperfect tense that was used, meant “**kept giving**”) - the portions to His disciples to then give to the people. Little by little, piece by piece, Jesus began to break away pieces of bread and fish. The more He broke off and gave away, the more that was left. Can you just imagine what a miracle that was? You see, Jesus didn't take that fish and turn them into two giant whales that would have been enough for everyone all at once. Just the same as He didn't turn those five loaves of bread into giant Wonder Breads so that everyone could take as much as they wanted. **Little by little, piece by piece**, Jesus would take a piece and give it away until all 5,000 men and their wives and children were filled.

This is more than a miracle – it is a lesson for us about the nature and character of Almighty God, and of Jesus Christ, His Son. Jesus did not qualify and stipulate who was to be fed, or in what order – and **He left no one out**. Jesus gave, through His disciples, the gift of food, and so the gift of life. It was up to those present to either receive the blessing in the food, or not! That is the way God offers salvation to the world. There are no strings attached – just believe and ask to be changed through repentance.

You see, God doesn't choose who will be successful in life. He isn't in a good mood on some days and in a bad mood on other days. He doesn't look at one person and say, “I like you. You get everything I've got,” and then look at someone else and say, “I don't know what it is about you. You just bug me. You just rub me the wrong way. You don't get anything!” No, my friends, God has no favorites. He loves everyone equally, and His offer of salvation is to the whole world! He knows who will refuse and who will accept – but He offers it freely anyway. We all know John 3:16-18, right? “*For God so loved the WORLD – that He gave His one and Only Son, that whoever BELIEVE shall NOT PERISH – but have eternal life.*” He loves equally and His offer of salvation is to the whole world. Here is where the catch is – and it is not a catch that God has put in, but one that mankind has caused. God knows who will receive and accept this offer, and who will not – but He offers it freely anyway. He offers it through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus, on the cross at Calvary. Jesus chose willingly to get onto the cross that He had carried, and submitted to the hammer and nails. Just as He freely gives salvation to those who believe in Him – He freely gave the food to the masses that day in the Galilee.

I ask you to open your pew Bibles to page 320, to Deuteronomy 30:19. At the bottom of the page in the right hand column please read: “*This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you – life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.*” My friends, that is what it comes down to. It is a choice before the world – Jesus is life, all other choices are death. The choice is simple, it is clear, and it is yours!