

## **The King Who Feeds his Sheep**

Matthew 14:13-21

One of my favorite things to do with my son, Joshua, is to read great books with him—books like *Narnia*, *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings* (which stories occasionally make their way into my sermons). But the challenge with reading great literature, though, is that because they are classics, we can become kind of numb to the story due to our familiarity with it. We know where it's going, so we lose the suspense. We're no longer caught up in the story like we once were.

For instance, we recently finished reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. And in terms of American literature, it doesn't really get more classic than that. It's a story that many of us have simply grown up with—I would guess that pretty much everyone here ten and older knows who Tom Sawyer is. But it was fascinating to not just assume I knew where it was going, but to actually slow down and read it, and to read it with Joshua and his fresh eyes, and find myself getting caught up in this familiar story once again.

The story before us this morning in Matthew's Gospel is perhaps the most famous and familiar miracle story from Jesus' life and ministry. It's the only miracle that's recorded in all four Gospels. It's the stuff of flannel graphs and children's paintings in the nursery. It supplies us with one of our most common metaphors when we pray and ask God to provide for our needs—"Lord, take these two fish and five loaves and multiply them." This story is vintage Jesus.

Of course it may not be familiar to everybody here this morning. And that's okay—we're glad you're here. But if you've grown up in the church, then there's a pretty good chance that a story like this can cause us to go into a kind of mental cruise control. Been there, heard that.

My prayer for us this morning is that we would hear this story again for the first time, and let ourselves get caught up in the suspense of it again, and see with fresh eyes the portrait of Jesus before us—the portrait of a perfect shepherd-king, who is nothing less than God in the flesh.

### **A Man in Demand (14:13)**

Our story begins with Jesus seeking solitude. It begins by showing us that, on the one hand, Jesus was a man like all men. He got hungry, and he ate; he got tired, and he slept. He felt pain, physically and emotionally. He cried at times. And sometimes he needed to be alone. He needed to be away from everyone and just spend time with his Father.

This is what he seeks in v. 13: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. . . ." And because of what happens in this story, it's something he doesn't actually get to do until the beginning of the next story, in vv. 22-23: "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the

crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

The reason Jesus wants to be alone here, we’re told in v. 13, is because he *heard* something. “When Jesus heard this . . .” What did he hear? If we look again at the passage we looked at last week, 14:1-12, we read the story of Herod Antipas, his murder of John the Baptist, and his alarm at hearing of Jesus’ miracles, thinking that John had somehow come back from the dead to get even.

It could be that what Jesus heard was news of John’s death—the death of his friend, his cousin, his forebear in ministry. A death that signaled that his own death was no longer that far off. And so for all those reasons, Jesus could have wanted to do what any man would want in that situation—to be alone, to think and pray, to take counsel and find comfort in his heavenly Father.

But the account of John’s murder, vv. 3-12, was actually a flashback in the story, and so I think it’s more likely that the report Jesus just heard was a report of Herod’s suspicion and offense toward him, going back to vv. 1-2 in ch. 14. He catches wind of Herod’s interest and desire to see him (as Luke tells us, 9:9), which sends the same signal—that the cross is no longer that far off. Sometimes we forget how Jesus lived his whole life, as it’s been put, in the shadow of the cross. You think of the weight of the cross in his mind in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. 26:36-46). That was probably not the first time that Jesus wrestled in prayer with his Father about what they decided before all eternity would happen. And yet, his hour had not yet come. The cross was approaching, but it was not yet here. So he leaves Herod’s territory and crosses the sea to find solitude elsewhere. Not because he’s afraid of Herod, but because his hour has not yet come.

But when he arrives, he finds anything but solitude. The rest of v. 13 tells us, “But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.” Despite his desire to be alone, Jesus was a man in demand. Everywhere he went, people wanted something from him. They brought him their sick to be healed. They sat at his feet to hear him teach.

Now, Matthew doesn’t elaborate here on what the people were seeking here. As the Gospel of John describes this event, he gives us a little more detail. Some of them, John tells us, were looking for political freedom. John 6:15 says that after the meal, “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

The people wanted a king who would stand up to Herod, and stand up to Rome who controlled him, to throw off their political chains and set the captives free. This was, after all, part of what God had promised to do for his people (e.g., Isa. 60–61). And they assumed the way God would do this was through a conquering king and a violent rebellion. So basically, they wanted another Herod, but one on their side. And to some, that’s not doubt what this little party in the wilderness looked like. The word translated “desolate place” is the same word as “wilderness” elsewhere. It’s the place where leaders who posed a threat to the rulers in charge sought refuge—men like David in 1 Samuel 23:14, or Elijah in 1 Kgs. 19:4. It’s also the place where political rebellions were staged, such as the Maccabean revolt nearly 200 years earlier (1 Macc. 2:27-31; 2 Macc. 5:27). Such a large crowd following a self-proclaimed king into the wilderness certainly roused the excitement of those seeking political freedom. But that’s not the kind of king Jesus is.

Others came out to see Jesus, according to John, not so much for political freedom but for physical provision. They wanted to benefit from the miracles he performed. Jesus says to them in John 6:26, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

And yet there were some who sought Jesus not because of what they thought they could get out of him, but because of who he was. When others abandoned Jesus because they didn’t get what they wanted out of him, his twelve disciples stayed with him. As Peter says in John 6:68, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

But Matthew doesn’t focus here on the crowds’ reaction to Jesus. He focuses his attention on Jesus’ reaction to the crowds who have now interrupted his chance at solitude. All of us have had that experience—you’re just settling into the booth at Panera with a cup of coffee and your book, knowing you’ve got 37 minutes until you have to go back to work, and along come a couple of friends, whom you’re always glad to see, but this is not what you had your heart set on for this time. For my wife there’s probably nothing more frustrating than in the afternoon, when the little kids are down, the kitchen’s clean, she finally sits down to read her Bible and get a few precious minutes with God, but as soon as she opens it up you hear Chloe crying down the hall. You just want five minutes—just five! Now, multiply that by the anxiety of the cross and the need to be with the Father, and you wonder, how’s Jesus going to respond?

### **A King Filled with Compassion (14:14)**

We see his response in v. 14: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.” Jesus doesn’t get upset. He doesn’t get angry. He responds with compassion. As tired and troubled as he is, he continues to do what he came to do—to love his lost sheep.

Verse 14 reminds us of Jesus’ reaction to the crowds back in ch. 9:36, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” In fact, in Mark’s account of this story, he includes that description: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd . . .” (Mk. 6:34). It’s a vivid picture. You think of what happens to sheep in the wilderness without a shepherd—they get lost. They wander off, with no one to seek them. They’re vulnerable, with no one to protect them from predators, no way to find food.

It’s also a phrase used several times in the Old Testament to describe what happens when God’s people lack proper leadership. In Numbers 27, Moses appoints Joshua to take his place when he’s gone so “that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd” (Num. 27:17). When the prophet Micaiah foretells King Ahab’s death in battle in 1 Kings 22, he says “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace’” (1 Kgs. 22:17). Their king was about to die and leave them leaderless.

What Moses sought to avoid, and what Micaiah said would happen, is what the people of Israel were experiencing prior to Jesus’ arrival. Despite whatever ill motives they might have had, they were a lost and helpless bunch. Their lives were marked with brokenness and sin. And they lacked the godly leadership needed to seek them out and rescue them, or to protect them and

provide for them. Herod's only concern was to silence his critics and have his way. Rome certainly had no interest in helping them walk with God. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders we've met in Matthew's story were likewise more interested in power and control than faithfulness to God. God's indictment against Israel's leaders back in Ezekiel 34 applied to virtually every leader in Jesus' day:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. <sup>6</sup> My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. (Ezek. 34:2-6)

They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. So despite his desire to be alone, when Jesus sees the crowd, he has compassion on them. His heart is moved to pity, and he does what kings are supposed to do—he shepherds the flock. More specifically, he *heals* them. Verse 14 tells us how he healed their sick. And then, he feeds them, which brings us to the main miracle in this story, the feeding of 5,000-plus people.

### **A God Who Gives Abundantly (14:15-21)**

In verse 15, Jesus' disciples make a logical suggestion. "Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves'" (14:15). It's actually a very thoughtful suggestion. They see the thousands of people before them, and recognize that there's no way to feed them all clear out here, so before it's too late, we should encourage them to head into town to find some food.

But then Jesus does something that's almost as shocking to us as it was to them. Verse 16: "But Jesus said, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'" How in the world were the disciples supposed to come up with enough food for a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children? They do the math (according to Mark and John), and figure it would cost about two-thirds of a year's wage to buy that much food.<sup>1</sup> They take an inventory, and respond in v. 17: "They said to him, 'We have only five loaves here and two fish.'" Not even enough for the twelve disciples, let alone the crowd before them.

Then Jesus makes his point in v. 18: "And he said, 'Bring them here to me.'" Jesus doesn't tell the disciples, "You feed them," because he really wants to see if they can figure it out. Neither does he chastise them for not understanding what he's about to do, or for not having enough faith to believe he can do it. He wants them to see who he really is. Jesus is drawing a contrast. He says to them, "*You* feed them," and when they reply that they can't, he says, "Give them to *me*." Only Jesus is the perfect shepherd-king who is able to feed his flock with heaven's power. He is nothing less than God in the flesh.

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<sup>1</sup> Mk. 6:37 // Jn. 6:7. See Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 566.

On the one hand, we see Jesus' humanity in this story; on the other, this miracle of feeding is nothing less than the hand of God. And this is perhaps the most intriguing connection back to Ezekiel 34. In that chapter, God responds to the failed leadership of Israel's shepherds in two ways. First, he says that he himself will shepherd his own flock. Ezekiel 34:11:

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup> And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 34:11-15)

But then he says in v. 23 that he will set a descendant of David on the throne as shepherd for God's people. "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken" (Ezek. 34:23-24).

Jesus is the answer to both of these promises. According to the flesh he is a descendant of David, yet he is at the same time the eternal Son of God (cf. Rom. 1:3-4). This story shows us how he is the perfect Shepherd-King. He makes them lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture he feeds them on the mountains of Israel.

And so in Matthew 14:19 we read, "Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt. 14:19-21).

Imagine the disciples' surprise as they passed out the loaves—each time reaching in and taking out the last one, and each time reaching in and taking out another. Imagine the wonder in their heart toward their king, Jesus. *Who is this man?* Who else cares for his people like this? Who else has control over the elements of creation such that he can take something that does not exist and make it exist? Who else but God?

And not only does Jesus feed his sheep, he gives abundantly. All four Gospels record the fact that there were twelve basketfuls of leftovers when they were done. Again, think of the wonder and awe of the disciples. To go from such inadequate resources as five loaves of bread and two fish, and when they're done distributing and picking up the extras, each one returns to Jesus holding in their basket more than what they started with.

But the point isn't to draw attention to the disciples. The point is to draw attention to Jesus. 'Whatever you've got, give it to me.' Here is the perfect shepherd-king who is God in the flesh. The one who doesn't just provide what is needed, but who gives over and abundantly. If the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not be in want (Ps. 23:1).

## Trusting in our God and King

So how do we see Jesus? Have we become numb to this portrait, or to others, due to their familiarity? Have you lost your awe of him? Let yourself be caught up again in the marvel of this story.

Do you look at him for what you hope to get out of him, like the crowds looking for a free meal? I'll follow Jesus *if . . .* he does this for me. Gets me out of debt. Finds me a girl. Gives me a child. Lands me a job. Makes my kids look good so that I look good. Helps advance my cause (like the crowds looking for a rebellion). And if I find that he offers something I'm not actually looking for, something I don't think I really need, or if he *actually asks something of me*, like denying myself, taking up my cross, and following him—then that's when I cut bait. Which is what many of the five thousand did later in John 6 (cf. v. 66).

Or do we see in Jesus the one who alone has the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68)? The one who offers not just bread to fill our stomachs, but “food that endures to eternal life” (Jn. 6:27). “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst’” (Jn. 6:35).

Do we see in Jesus the chiefest and fullest expression of God's shepherding care for his people? How will God search for his sheep and seek them out? How will God bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak? How will he save his people? How will he feed his sheep? By sending his eternal Son into the world, to take on human flesh and become their shepherd. By giving his eternal Son as a sacrifice for our sins. The shepherd takes the place of the sheep. As Isaiah 53 describes, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6).

Do we see love, forgiveness, hope, healing, and life when we look at Jesus? And do we see it in abundance? Do we believe that he measures out his love for us not based on what we deserve, but according to the measure of his grace? Do we trust him to provide for our needs right now? And where we have want, do we trust that in the end we will have everything? As Paul says in Romans 8, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32).

And do we believe that Jesus still loves us abundantly? That he still answers prayers this way? Do we believe that if we give him what we have as Westgate—our meager resources, our time, our energy, our ideas, our money, our plans—that he can multiply that meager offering and use it to reach hundreds upon hundreds of people for Christ? The king we follow is not some insecure salesman anxiously trying to close a deal on some second-rate product; he is the God of the Universe, worthy of all allegiance, and possessing all power and authority in heaven to accomplish his good and gracious will. Do we pray to him *as though that's who we're talking to*? Do we believe that there is no limit to his goodness and grace and what he can accomplish through his people? Do we believe that if we have Jesus, we have everything, and so we're free to serve and follow him without fear of loss or trial, even death? The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Jesus is our perfect shepherd-king, God in the flesh. Let's trust and follow him.