

**“Strength for the Journey in Difficult Times” – Samuel L. Adams**  
**Matthew 14:13-21**  
**Lexington Presbyterian Church (8/2/2020)**

Everyone participating in worship this morning might agree that we are living in difficult and uncertain days. The effects of COVID-19, economic upheaval, and sweeping cultural changes are all part of our landscape right now. The virus continues to wreak havoc in our country and local communities, among our family members and friends, especially those who are immuno-compromised. Since the pandemic hit, many of you have experienced real financial difficulties or know people who have. Your amazing and historic town relies on tourism and residential students for its vitality, and normal visiting patterns and businesses have been severely disrupted by the virus. And with regard to cultural changes, they are happening fast. As is the case in Richmond, you are facing some reckonings in Lexington about history, what names you attach to things, how you assess our complex past, especially in relation to the Civil War, and what your historical memory will look like moving forward. These are difficult questions, and whatever your perspective on the conversation and possible changes in Lexington, we can all agree that this is a complicated and fluid time in which we are living.

Perhaps it’s also fair to say that all of us are aging a fair amount during the pandemic and becoming ever more cynical about the current state of the world. We might roll our eyes at the bickering in the political sphere and the tribal differences that have become a fixture in our public discourse. These differences often seem impossible to bridge. Polarization and our inability to come together to solve pressing problems are noteworthy features of American life right now, and this can lead to feelings of helplessness and even cynicism.

Skepticism and even cynicism are nothing new. I would venture to say most of us have been burned in the past by difficult and often unforeseen events: sudden tragedy, such as the

premature death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or a divorce. These experiences can leave scars on our hearts that linger, even for decades. For all of us as we grow older, we also experience a growing realization that things are not always fair. One of the saddest aspects of being a parent is watching your kids discover that life can be cruel. As they approach adolescence or sometimes even earlier, children learn that not everything is as it seems, people can be dishonest, mean, and unforgiving, and sometimes outcomes are not what they should be. This recalls the book of Ecclesiastes, where the author declares “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (Ecc 9:11) We even have an English expression for skepticism based on experience: *worldly wise*. This is someone who has learned how the world can sometimes work, often through bitter experience.

Yet something is lost when we become overly skeptical and worldly-wise, even if the circumstances of our broken world lead us in that direction. We can lose the child-like wonder that comes with believing in what is seemingly impossible. As Christians, this is not a small point, because the Bible presents us again and again with miracle stories. The New Testament in particular is filled with accounts of Jesus’ healing of someone in distress, his ability to cast out demons, or perform some super-human act as a way of bringing others into the faith and making a point to his detractors.

For those of us seeking a rational Christianity that explains everything in a logical and a systematic manner based on our worldly wisdom, these miracle stories are difficult to categorize. Do we dismiss them entirely as the folklore of ancient Judea? Or do we say that miraculous events happened in ancient times, but they no longer occur in today’s “real world”? Those of us who examine the Bible in seminary settings frequently point to the New Testament miracle

stories as an effort by the Gospel writers to link Jesus with Elijah, Elisha, and Moses. One can go through the narrative details and find numerous parallels between what Jesus does and the miracles associated with Elijah, for example. This is one of the reasons Jesus is frequently mistaken for Elijah in the Gospels.

Yet these stories have a larger purpose for us as Christians: they remind us that with God, all things are possible. The miracle stories make accessible for us the beauty of the creation, the wondrous gift of life that God has given to each of us, and the fact that amazing events happen around us every day, and we are too busy becoming worldly wise to notice. C.S. Lewis explains that “Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.” Miracles place God’s ability to accomplish anything into a bite-sized nugget so that we can understand the awesomeness of the One we worship and serve.

Of all the miracle stories, the feeding of the 5,000 is probably the most famous one. Aside from the resurrection, this is the only miracle account that appears in all four gospels, so it is obviously a story of some significance, very important for the earliest Christians. Today we look at the story as it appears in Matthew, the longest of the four gospels. Now one of the things I impress upon my students at Union, of which Kelly-Ann Rayle is a stellar example, is to read the Bible with discerning eyes, to look at passages very carefully, to explore the text for interesting details they may not have noticed before. Above all, to be careful that they do not confuse familiarity with understanding. All of us know this story, but I want us to look more closely this morning at Matthew’s account and see if there is anything surprising and relevant for a contemporary world that is so filled with skepticism and disbelief.

Jesus has become a local celebrity by the time of this miracle account, and the crowds are pressing hard against him. They are following along the shore as Jesus drifts in a boat. The disciples warn him that the hour is getting late, and it is time to send the crowd home before things get out of hand. Yet Jesus feels compassion for those in the crowd and decides to heal the sick ones and provide food for everyone present. He tells the disciples to start passing out food, and it becomes possible for all present to eat, a number that totals 5,000, not counting women and children.

What follows in the Gospel lesson is the recounting of the miracle itself. These verses parallel the gift of manna in the Old Testament, when God provides food while Moses is in charge of the people, and everyone is filled. All of those present with Jesus sit in a grassy field and eat, with more than enough to spare. Jesus is the host of this banquet, and he is going to see to it that everyone is fed. Then he orders his disciples to gather up the remainder. Here is a final detail to the feast that we often miss: Jesus does not want any food to be wasted. Even though he has just fed a great multitude, the disciples take up all of the remaining bread and fish. Jesus combines a miraculous ability to provide food with an aversion to waste.

We all wonder when we read a story like this whether it really happened. It defies human logic to suppose that an enormous crowd could be fed with such meager provisions. Yet before we relegate this story to the realm of folktale, it needs to be stated plainly that we hang our faith tradition on the notion that God sent his son into the world to give us new life. That this savior actually walked the streets of first-century Judea, performing amazing acts and interpreting the Scriptures. Our entire Christian tradition is predicated on Jesus's declaration "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). This story of the feeding of the 5,000 forces us to take Jesus' statement

about being the bread of life both literally and figuratively. Just as he provided wine at the wedding in Cana, he now tends to the needs of all the hungry admirers in his presence. We are about to celebrate communion, which is a reenactment of Jesus's leadership not just at the last meal with his disciples, but at the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus promises in both stories that he will provide for his flock and make sure that they are blessed. He will take their sufferings upon himself.

I have mentioned that the New Testament miracle stories have many parallels with the Elijah and Elisha narratives. My kids were in a church musical a few years ago about Elijah, and there is a beautiful solo about what God can do for us: "God will provide strength for the journey, bread for the morning, and shelter for the night." This assertion is not just a feel-good chorus for a kid's play, but the heart of our Christian faith. The feeding of the 5,000 reminds us that we owe our livelihood not to our own initiative and industriousness, but to God, who created us and who supplies us with the food and water we need for survival. Think about the first major petition of the Lord's Prayer? "Give us this day our daily bread." In this statement we affirm our dependence on God, on the miraculous intervention of the Lord we worship to supply our every need. The pandemic has reminded us not to take good health and basic necessities for granted, because these things are not guaranteed.

Some of you have seen a movie that came out a few years ago, *Finding Neverland*. It tells the story of J.M. Barrie, the author of the classic play Peter Pan. Barrie befriends a widow and her four young boys in London and begins to spend time with the boys. He models many details in the play on these boys who do not want to grow up. You all know Barrie's story about the London family whose children go to Neverland, meet Peter Pan, and get in all sorts of adventures. In the movie, when the play premieres in London, Barrie is worried about how the

adults, with all of their worldly wisdom and disbelief, will perceive the story. So, he decides to pepper the opening night audience with children from a local orphanage, encouraging them to clap for Tinkerbell and get excited about the wonderful details of Neverland and Peter Pan. Barrie's gamble pays off: the enthusiasm of the children is contagious, and the adults quickly become entranced with Barrie's play themselves. It takes the faith of these orphan children to rouse the adults from their disbelief.

One of my goals during the pandemic is to become less jaded: by remembering the struggles of others, especially those in food-insecure situations, people living alone, or those trapped in abusive relationships with nowhere to go. To take the advice of the scientists seriously by wearing my mask and limiting exposure to any kind of crowd. Such actions do not make any of us saintly, but by trying to make ourselves more like the Beloved Community that the late Congressman John Lewis talked about – if we seek solidarity with each other, we might more closely approximate the first disciples of Jesus, who risked so much to follow him and who were present at the feeding of the 5,000. If we can only seek to become more of a fellowship of believers, this in and of itself might feel like a miracle if it can ever be achieved.

My latest zany plan, and it's taking some coaxing of my wonderful wife Helen, is to buy a travel camper, an RV I pull behind my truck. During the pandemic, sales of these campers are up 175%, because everyone wants to take off down the road and find a secluded place to camp and enjoy the beauty of God's creation, especially since air travel is so precarious. We have rented campers a few times and now we have put down a deposit on one. The make we are getting is called the R-Pod: it's small, lightweight, and easier to back into spots at the national parks we hope to visit over the next decade. I also really enjoy hiking in the Shenandoah Valley,

especially near Lexington, and I want to be able to drive it up the Blue Ridge Parkway and find interesting places to camp.

I have even joined the R-Pod Facebook group and asked a few questions. I get kind and amazing responses within moments. This is a group of maybe 15,000 persons around the country who want to support one another. It is an economically and ethnically diverse community, and it is the most positive and supportive use of social media I have ever seen. If an R-Pod breaks down or even has a minor mechanical problem, an owner can take a picture of the issue, post it to the Facebook page, and within minutes 5-10 people respond immediately with how to fix it, including step by step instructions. Political putdowns, making fun of someone's lack of mechanical expertise or the décor in another camper or any other type of taunt is strictly forbidden, and anyone who shows disrespect has to apologize or leave the group. Among the R-Pod owners, no one cares what color you are, how much money you make, who you voted for, where you went to college or even whether you went to college. The only thing that matters is helping each other out and enjoying the outdoors.

Before the pandemic hit, there was a woman whose was planning a cross country trip with her husband, but he died suddenly of cancer. When she reported his death on the Facebook page, hundreds of condolence message came streaming in, with everyone encouraging her to take the trip. They offered to take her out to dinner when she reached their town, to go on a walk with her, to take her sightseeing, and everyone gave her tips on places to park her camper. One can find glimpses of what it means to be the Beloved Community in surprising places, and I have done so through the R Pod owners FB group. Incidentally, our camper arrives later this month, and so you can look for us up your way – I will probably come have lunch in Lexington a fair amount when it is safe to do so.

Friends, our challenges right now are real, and resolve is sorely needed for all of us as the reality of the virus sets in. As we confront the pandemic and come to the realization that this is going to be a much tougher challenge than we realized, as we also confront our frequent tendency to assume we know everything, that we have become worldly wise, perhaps we might seek the resolve of Jacob, who refused to let go as he wrestled with the angel, who sought answers to his questions, whose dogged pursuit of the truth might serve as a model for us during the pandemic. This resolve led to the formation of the covenant community of Israel, led by Jacob and Moses and Miriam, a community that nurtured thousands of believers, including Jesus of Nazareth. Throughout the ages, even in the toughest of times, these followers refused to become so worldly wise that they limited the capacity of God to transform their lives. Today we must have the same resolve, not by dispensing with clear scientific evidence, but by remembering that God is always working through and among us, and we should never doubt the capacity of the One we worship and serve to find a space for healing.

The paradox of being a Christian is balancing the experience of our years with a belief in the miraculous. We learn the way the world works, how to “get ahead,” and what defies logic. But sometimes that logic is challenged by miracle stories. Today we pause to acknowledge the miracle that occurred in the Galilee 2,000 years ago. A bunch of hungry people in a field needed food, and Jesus made sure there was enough for everyone. His disciples doubted the possibility of this event, but Jesus persisted anyway. As if this were not enough, he continued his journey all the way to the cross to perform the ultimate miracle: dying for our sins and coming back to life so that we may have life and have it abundantly. He is the bread of life, the one in whom we are supposed to place our trust. Even when we persist in our disbelief, Jesus persists in his love for

us. “God will provide strength for the journey, bread in the morning, and shelter for the night.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.