

More than a Miracle: Providing in Abundance
Matthew 14:13-21

The great Christian writer and apologist, C.S. Lewis, wrote a book entitled *Miracles* that explores the nature of God's work in the world. In this book, Lewis argues that a Christian must not only accept but rejoice in miracles as a testimony of the unique personal involvement of God in his creation. It's a great book that helps wrap our minds around what God does in our daily lives. One of my favorite quotes from him regarding miracles is this: "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." Let me say that again: "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." Essentially, he's saying that miracles are the scraps of paper we can hold that point us to the banners that sit high above us, out of reach. We can learn so much more about God if we look at more than just the miracle. It's hard because miracles themselves are amazing enough. They surprise us. They energize us. They humble and comfort us. But what if the miracles God gives us in our lives is just a digestible message that points to a greater truth?

For the next few weeks we will be looking at several miracles that Jesus performs in the gospel of Matthew. The miracles themselves cause us to stare in wonder and amazement. Only God can do something like that. Only the Son of God can do something so incredible. In our readings we will see Jesus feed over five thousand people with a small amount of fish and bread. We will see Jesus walk on water. We will see Jesus cast out demons. All of these things point to Jesus as God, as our Lord, as the King of Creation. But what if that is just the post-it note, the abbreviated truth that we can manage to understand? Meanwhile the larger gospel reality hangs large and looming up in the heavens. Can we grasp all that God is and does or should we just focus on the one event? Do we look at the miracles in our lives as just a moment or do they point to bigger truths about who our God is all the time? That's what we'll be exploring. Those are the questions we will be answering as we drink deeply from God's word, not just focused on the miracle but on all that it says and implies about our great God. These are more than just miracles. They are the magnificence and majesty of God on a scale that our minds can comprehend in the moment.

Before we dive into the meat of the miracle, I'd like to highlight something important that begins each of these miraculous moments. Jesus is withdrawing. Each of our gospel readings for the next three weeks begin with Jesus wanting to get away for a while. He needs separation. He needs a break. He's tired and needs some time to rest and pray. He is human after all. In a way, I believe this reality sets up an aspect to these miracles that need addressing. Jesus cares about mental health. He cares about your mental health. Even in the midst of the moments that he needs rest, he is moved to compassion and action for people. He addressing the needs of those around him, even as he stressed and anxious. Today's reason for withdrawal is the death of his cousin, John the baptizer. In the previous chapter of Matthew, John had been beheaded and just like any normal person, this upset Jesus. He needed some time to recuperate. Jesus knows when he needs a break and he knows when you do too. He allows his rest to be interrupted to help each of us in our mental and physical anguish.

That's so important for us today as the mental state of America is not well. According to polls from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 47% of Americans sheltering in place reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to coronavirus. Another poll in April stated that 54% of those who lost income or employment reported negative mental health impacts from worry or stress over coronavirus. According to the Washington Post, a federal emergency hotline for people in emotional distress registered a more than 1,000 percent increase in April compared with the same time last year. In the same month, roughly 20,000 people texted that hotline, run by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Depending on how unemployment fluctuates, it is predicted that we will have an increase of anywhere from 4,000 to 18,000 additional suicides and 4,800 to 22,000 drug

overdoses. Can the miracles of Jesus help us see a way out of this? Can the works of our savior, in the moment, point us to grander truths about God's rescue plan in Jesus for all people? We are overdue for some good news. The world needs it. Let's lift our eyes off the pain to see the banner gospel flying overhead.

Today, the message booming from heaven is this: God sees you, wherever you are, right where you are, and provides for you in abundance. In a world where we can never have enough, it is hard to hear this banner truth from Jesus. In a world that more often shows you what you lack, this is the true reality. You have everything you need and you have it in abundance. Out of compassion, Jesus heals the sick and provides a meal that has twelve full baskets of leftovers. He goes above and beyond for these people, taking a meager meal of five loaves of bread and two fish and creating a feast that they can't even finish. It's a miraculous thing that Jesus does here. It shows us that he is compassionate. It shows us that he is powerful. It shows us that he is God. We can stop and celebrate those facts today but remember, "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." The larger story that is given briefly in this short essay is that God provides for your needs and he does so richly and generously. Our cup runneth over when it comes to the blessings God gives us in our lives. Maybe we can't believe this banner message because of how overwhelmed we are in the moment. Our eyes are down on the problem, on the lacking, on the need.

Many people are feeling this right now. Unemployment is high. Resources are low. Living paycheck to paycheck is stressful enough, let alone during a pandemic. Maybe you or a loved one have not been considered "essential" during the lockdown. Maybe you feel left behind or forgotten in the tense times we find ourselves. You each know your own situation. You each know someone, if it isn't yourself, that faces these moments of fear and panic. Where will the next meal come from? We've cut back as far as we can. You are taking a break from that today to hear me stand here and say that you aren't lacking. I can understand why you wouldn't believe me. I get why you'd roll your eyes or tune me out. I'm going to keep saying it anyway because it is true. You are here today. You are alive and surviving today because of God's abundant provision in your life. How many times have you just made it through? Have many times have you gotten by by what seems like the skin of your teeth? Look back and see. You made it. You had enough. You have enough. Please don't let the moments of despair and anxiety overwhelm you to the point where you can't see that.

You may be humbled when you look at how the other half lives. I don't mean the top one percent, I'm talking about the poorest of the poor. We have poverty in our country but Americans are still in the top one percent in the world when it comes to wealth. Years ago, I was blessed with the opportunity to go to Africa to meet with our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Ethiopia. Yes, there are many Lutherans in Africa. I remember the places we gathered for worship, for meetings, for prayer. The nicest thing about these rooms, often, was the concrete slab under our feet. Exposed wooden frames were made with rough wood, not clean two by fours. The tin roofs in the pastor's office we met in one night in Hawassa was leaking just behind me. They built as they were able but saw these as sufficient to use for ministry. Same with their homes. As a matter of fact, they considered themselves abundantly blessed to have what they had. It made me wonder if our standard in America was too high, as if we could survive with less. Maybe an older used car is better than taking on car payments for something newer and shinier. Maybe I don't need cable, especially if I can't afford my phone. Maybe I don't need that fancy smartphone if I can afford my electric bills. Maybe our abundance is shown in the choices we make that create scarcity in other areas of life. Maybe the abundance is obvious, if we just step back and see how we've used or abused it. Maybe God provides in ways we aren't trained to notice.

What is often overlooked in this parable is the means of distributing the gifts of Jesus. Jesus provides the overabundance of goods but it is the disciples that are given the responsibility to hand it out to the people. They come to him, receive his gifts, then pass it out to those who are gathered. This is a responsibility of Jesus' followers. He gives them that task. Sometimes miracles come directly from God. We find a random check we forgot to cash. We

manage to have just enough to pay for groceries, just enough gas to get to and from an appointment. Most of the time, the way “how” of God’s plan is played out through you and me. It is when people decided to step up and be the hands and feet of God, distributing his riches to those around in need. Families stepped up to bring you meals as you were mourning. Friends came and helped you move out of a tough situation. The church helped bridge the gap between paychecks with a freewill offering or food and gas cards. The means in which God helps the world is his people and if we do truly receive abundantly then there is always a way we can help one another.

I can’t talk about God’s good gifts, what he gives in abundance, without mentioning the cross. This instrument of torture where Christ gave himself in abundance so that we can be forgiven lavishly and repeatedly. That moment points to the bigger banner that reads “it is finished”. His flesh and blood is the bountiful offering made for our eternal security and salvation. I can’t stop there either. His resurrection is the ample solution to our sin and deficiencies and death. It gives us hope for tomorrow, beyond our momentary afflictions. That moment points to the bigger banner that reads “death no longer has dominion”. What Jesus offers us in his life, death, and resurrection is more than enough to save us and sustain us. His sacrifice on the cross cares for our spiritual needs in abundance and his resurrection generously provides for all our physical needs, even victory over death, for all eternity.

So, as we take in this miracle, please don’t get lost in the moment. As you live on a shoe string budget or stress about what tomorrow may bring, please don’t get lost in those moments either. These are just scraps of paper pointing to a litany of examples where God promises to provide in abundance for you. Don’t let despair or depression get the best of you. Don’t let the overwhelming moment draw your eyes off of what God can do and is doing for you. He is providing in abundance for you. He is working his miracles in your life: sometimes directly but often through his people on earth. Don’t miss what God is doing. Don’t forget all that he has done. When we start to lose focus. When we start to overlook his miracles we can begin to think that He has overlooked us. It isn’t true. He’s there. Hearing and seeing with compassion. He’s moved to provide for your needs. Body and soul. Believe that for yourself. Please share that truth with someone who needs to hear it because there are plenty that do.