

**GENESIS 32:22-31 (p. 27)**

**AUGUST 2, 2020**

**MATTHEW 14:13-21 (p. 796)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

You are a Gracious and Generous God, a Loving God who pours out Blessings upon us daily! Therefore, we ask you Father to Bless us with your Truth. Stir up within us a new wonder for your Word! Teach us, enlighten us, and give us a passion to share what we learn! Make us bold in faith, Lord, and even bolder in love, so that together we might make you known in the world! We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen!

**“MIRACLES”**

The Feeding of the Five Thousand! One of the best-known Miracles of all time! The only Miracle, by-the-way, other than the Resurrection itself, recorded in all four Gospels! Jesus has been teaching what the Kingdom of Heaven is like with Parables! And now, He visibly demonstrates it with a Miracle! Jesus provides our “daily bread”, if you will, both physically and spiritually! So today, I'd like to talk about Miracles!

Well, actually, I would much rather talk about Jacob Wrestling with God. That was my initial thought in fact, when I read the lessons for this week. You see, our first reading this morning is one of my all-time favorites! Imagine, wrestling with God, and in the process, being changed, given a new identity! A Preacher could do a lot with that, don't you think? It might actually preach itself! I mean, Jacob's descendants are God's Chosen People, right? So, God's people, are those who sometimes struggle with God, and are thus transformed! Named, and claimed actually! Maybe you've experienced that? I know I have! Both sides of the equation, in fact!

But even that's a Miracle, isn't it? So, let's go ahead and wrestle with God. And let's start, by honestly asking ourselves how we "feel" about Miracles. They come in all shapes and sizes you know? Water from a Rock, and Manna in the Wilderness. Elijah being fed by birds, and making a handful of flour feed a family, for a "very long time". He later raised a little boy from death to life, and starting a fire on a water-drenched altar, when hundreds of prophets of Baal couldn't even do it on a dry one! Well, actually, God did all that! But it was through the Prophet Elijah! There is Joshua and the Walls of Jericho, and Moses at the Red Sea. Esther saving her people from total annihilation, and Abraham and Sarah birthing a Nation! We have Joseph and his Technicolor Dreamcoat, remember, and David in the Lion's Den! And that's just a random sampling from the Old Testament, prior to Jesus appearing on the scene!

So, think Walking on the Water, or turning Water into Wine! Picture Calming the Water with just a Word! You know, stilling the Wind and the Waves! Think Blind people given sight! And Lame people enabled to walk! People with Leprosy outright cured! Think of all the sick people made well again! Consider Lazarus bursting forth from the Tomb! And now we have the Feeding of the Five Thousand! A Miracle which is actually repeated in the very next chapter of Matthew's Gospel! Only that time with Four Thousand people, on the other side of the Lake, getting fed over in Gentile Territory!

There really are all kinds of Miracles in Scripture, aren't there? And quite frankly, they are pretty diverse! So, how do you feel about them? Really? What do you think?

What I mean is, we live in a Post-Modern world, right? We are enlightened people! We can explain almost anything! Or at a minimum, demystify it! Which some also attempt to do with God! If we can just explain it, we think, or categorize it, then we can control it, right! That goes for whatever “it” comes to mind! So how do you feel about Miracles? And before you answer, stop and consider what Saint Augustine once said. “If you believe only what you like in the Gospel—and reject what you don’t like—then it is not the Gospel that you believe in—but rather yourself”! How do you feel about Miracles?

You know another question might be, what “qualifies” as a Miracle? For instance, is the Birth of a Baby a Miracle? I mean it’s clearly a Blessing, right! But is it a Miracle? We can explain it, can’t we? There is a complicated interaction of human cells, replicating themselves, differentiating themselves, all without outside interference! So, is that a Miracle? Have you ever witnessed the birth of a baby?

How about the way the Moon’s gravitational pull affects the oceans, keeping them in a steady, rhythmic cycle? Is that a Miracle? The ocean cycles then, in turn, regulate weather patterns. Everything on our planet is actually inner-connected. So, is that a Miracle, in and of itself? There is a definite order to the entire Universe! That’s just a “given”! But is that “order” a Miracle?

And here is a better question still, now that I think about it. Do Miracles help you believe in God? Is that the point of one? There is a Psalm that says, “Only a Fool says in his heart that there is no God”! Psalm 14 in fact. And I totally agree! I think it would be foolish, or blind, or agenda-driven maybe, to deny the existence of God! That is, if you have eyes to see!

Consider those intricate cells in the human body, and how they do what they do. Or the fact that the earth needs a consistent Temperature Range to sustain life. It’s not too hot, and not too cold. And there is just the right combination of oxygen and nitrogen and hydrogen too. Any deviation in any of this would kill all life as we know it, immediately! “Only a fool would say there is no God!” And that bold proclamation is repeated in Psalm 53, as well. Two, almost identical Psalms, appear in the Hymnbook of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Check it out sometime. 14 and 53! And when something bears repeating in Scripture, shouldn’t we pay attention?

Again, the Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only Miracle witnessed to in all four Gospels. Does that say, “pay attention”, or what? And my point, in a very roundabout way is this; “Does it take a Miracle, in order for you to believe in the existence of God?” Or “Does it take the existence of God, in order for you to believe in a Miracle?” Let’s wrestle a bit, shall we?

Jesus has just received very troubling news. His cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded by King Herod.

A fellow worker in the Kingdom, a Colleague in Ministry, someone Jesus most likely played with as little boy—the man sent to prepare the way for Jesus’ arrival, to set the stage if you will, to un-harden hearts to receive the Good News—has been martyred for his Faith!

Jesus is obviously devastated! And upon hearing the news, He gets into a boat and pushes a little-ways off of shore. “He withdraws,” we’re told, “privately, to a solitary place”. He wants to be alone! Maybe you’ve been there emotionally? If not you, I’ll bet you know someone who has! A tragedy occurs that takes the wind right out of your sails! Some type of loss drives you deep inside of yourself, or possibly to your knees! You just need some time to think and pray!

Jesus has spent a lot of time and energy recently, teaching, sharing Parables, doing some healing, training His Disciples! He is most likely tired, don’t you think! Exhausted maybe? Just prior to today’s lesson, Jesus traveled back home to own His hometown, where He does even more teaching. And the people there “were amazed,” it says! And why wouldn’t they be! But it also says “they took offense at Him”! They rejected Him! As impressed as they were with what He said, they just couldn’t get their heads around the fact that a local boy had achieved, so much insight!

So, if you were Jesus, how would all that feel? People don’t want to hear what you have to say! They don’t believe you, let alone believe in you! You have no credibility with them what-so-ever, no respect, even right here in your own hometown!

Now set that on top of the disturbing news about your friend, John! Where would you be emotionally? Who wouldn't want to be alone, right? Who wouldn't need to step back for a moment, and catch their breath? Think about carrying all that pain, not to mention all that responsibility! Can you blame Jesus for wanting to "withdraw" for a while?

Only the crowds won't let Him. They notice His departure by boat, and decide to follow Him on foot. Picture that? Imagine looking up from the solitude of your boat, where the waves are gently lapping at the side. Feel the breeze. Hear the Sea Gulls calling in the distance. Imagine sitting up and seeing those multitudes walking along the shore, seeing them through grief-filled eyes, just waiting for you to land? Maybe you can relate to that?

You walk in the door after a long day, only to notice a note on the table telling you that such-and-such stopped by, and really needs your help. Or maybe your son or grandson is standing there, staring up at you with those sad, puppy dog eyes, holding his half-finished school project in his hands? Or, his baseball glove! Maybe your daughter or granddaughter has tears rolling down her cheeks as she beckons to you from the top of the stairs! You are whipped! And on top of that you are grieving! And yet, someone wants more of your time and energy! What would your initial response be?

Well "when Jesus landed" Matthew says, "and saw the large crowd, He had compassion on them, and began to heal their sick". Again, He is emotionally spent and physically exhausted, yet Jesus jumps out of the boat the minute He lands, and immediately goes to work healing those around Him!

He doesn't do it out of obligation, or because He has to. He does it out of compassion! Mark and Luke both add that He began to teach, as well! Imagine that! That might just be the first Miracle in the text! It certainly speaks to the character of our Lord, doesn't it? I mean here is God Incarnate, tired and hurting, seeking, craving really, a moment of solitude and peace! And yet, selflessly He pours out Blessings on others! What does that say? At a minimum, it should give us a peek at the magnitude of God's love, right? But does it also speak to what is expected of us?

Compare that to the reaction of the Disciples, who quote, "as soon as evening approached, and they noticed that this was a remote place," urged Jesus, "to send the people away so that they could fend for themselves." Go buy your own food! Go and deal with your own problems, your own needs, all by yourselves.

Unfortunately, that may be typical. "It's late, and there's no food around. We are way out in the middle of nowhere to boot! Shop & Save is closed! Send the visitors away! Let them fend for themselves! This isn't our problem, at least not yet, so let's just keep it that way! Jesus, let them go and buy food for themselves! Give them a blessing or something! Maybe say a prayer? But send them on their way! Cut your sermon short if you have to, but send them off!

I'll bet you've been there, especially the "cutting the sermon short" part! Unexpected visitors show up out of the blue, only no one has made dinner plans! You don't have a thing on hand! Maybe everyone should just go to a restaurant? Or maybe it's worse?

Someone shows up unexpectedly, and really needs your help. You immediately think about yourself though, and immediately start ushering them out the door. “Well, thanks for stopping. It’s been nice. I’m a little busy right now. But why don’t you look me up when you come this way again”!

It’s not one of Disciples’ finest moments, is it? I’m not seeing a whole lot of hospitality here, or compassion from them, are you? But that makes Jesus’ response even more miraculous, don’t you think! “They don’t need to go away,” He says. “You give them something to eat”! Jesus turns to those who want to send the hungry, hurting, troubled folks away, and commissions them to minister to the multitudes! Maybe that’s another Miracle? It’s certainly a lesson! “You give them something to eat.” “You handle it for me.” “You take care of them in my Name!” “Just go ahead and do it!”

“How,” they ask? We’re not equipped! We don’t have any supplies either! We’re not even trained? “Well what do you have”, asks Jesus? “What is in your hand right now?” “All we have are two fish, and a few loaves of bread! What in the world could we possibly do with that?”

It’s reminds me of Moses, back in Exodus 4. God commands him to go and minister to God’s people, to go and set them free. Only Moses does his very best to talk the Lord out of the assignment. “What if they don’t believe me, or listen to what I have to say? What if I don’t have what I need for the job? What if I’m ill-qualified?” To which God answers, “Well what’s in your hand Moses?” “What’s in your hand right now?” I like that!



“What do you have?”, not, “What do you not have?”! “A Staff,” answers Moses. “Well take that”, says God! “You give them something to eat.” Would that be a Miracle?

Remember, there were five thousand men standing there that day, not to mention all the women and children! So do the math! In the First Century world, almost all men were married. And the average family size ranged from five to ten children. So conservatively, there is somewhere between thirty-five and sixty thousand hungry people standing there! In the middle of the wilderness! With their mouths open, and their stomachs growling! Mark and John both tell us that it would take eight months-worth of wages for everyone to get a single bite! That confirms the size of the crowd, doesn't it? So, the need is real! Overwhelming really! And it's immediate! “You give them something to eat,” says Jesus, “out of whatever it is you have on hand.”

I see us, don't you? Which may be yet another miracle! We too are often convinced that we don't have “enough,” or that we don't have “enough of what it takes”, to feed people in Jesus' Name! We are so sure that we need “more” before we start reaching out! We have a mindset of scarcity, actually, instead of one of abundance! So, we ask, with what can we possibly do this! With what can we do this right now? With what can we do this in the middle of a Coronavirus Outbreak? To which Jesus answers, “Well what do you have?”

Five loaves and two fish! Are you kidding me? How much bread is in a loaf? How big are the fish? This is what, three or four Filet-of-Fish sandwiches at best? There are tens of thousands of people here! And we are out in the middle of the wilderness to boot! But there, there is another miracle even! Consider the location! They are in the Wilderness!

This is the same kind of place that God miraculously sustained Israel, God's Chosen People, Jacob's descendants, with Manna, for forty years remember, as they wandered around! This is the same kind of place where Jesus was tempted by Satan at the beginning of His ministry! Tempted, by the way, to turn stones into bread! This "feeding" event pre-figures the Messianic Banquet at the end of time too, where there will be great feasting! And foreshadows the Upper Room as well! It also miraculously takes place immediately after Herod's "degenerate banquet", where John the Baptist is killed! I wonder if we have eyes to see?

And there is more! There always is! The crowds are instructed to "sit down on the grass"! Do you know how precious little grass there is in Israel? Let alone in the Wilderness? I've been on the Northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. I can tell you, that much grass would be a Miracle! Try to comprehend the extravagance in that—the depth of the need, and the corresponding depth of God's love! And they picked up twelve basketfuls of leftovers! Do you see the abundance? Do you see the Blessings? Do you think God was trying to emphasize "faith" over "food"? Or "faith" maybe, over "scarcity"? Or possibly "faith" over "fear"?

You know, maybe the biggest Miracle of all in this, is that you and I are the instruments God chooses to use to Bless others? We are the vehicles that deliver God's Blessings to the world! If that doesn't make you believe in Miracles, nothing will! The Lord uses immoral and insignificant people like you and me to further His cause! That was a pretty big struggle for me early on! I'm pretty clear on how poor of a vessel I am to carry the Gospel! I am a cracked pot actually, with mares and flaws all over the place! But that's the plan, isn't it? God's plan! To use the "ordinary" to achieve the "extraordinary"! That's truly a Miracle!

I also used to wonder why Almighty God didn't simply pour out Miracles all the time, on everyone, all at once even. Wouldn't that make everyone believe in Him, cause everyone to appreciate Him? Then I read about a student of Rabbi Ben Jochai, who asked a similar question regarding the daily Manna in the desert during the Exodus. The Rabbi answered with a parable. "Once there was a king who had a son to whom he gave a yearly allowance, paying him the entire annual sum on a fixed date. It soon happened though, that the day on which the allowance was due, was the only day of the year when the father ever saw his son. So, the wise king changed his plan, and instead, gave his son, day-by-day, that which was sufficient for the day. The son then visited his father every morning."

Daily Bread! Small daily Miracles, brought to us in ordinary ways, through ordinary people! Miracles designed to bring us that much closer to the Father, daily, again and again! I guess I see a Miracle, don't you! And all of God's people said, Amen.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Thank you for this precious time in prayer Lord. Thank you for listening to our silent pleas and petitions, and for comforting our hearts with your Spirit. Thank you for opening up our hearts and our minds to your Truths, and for opening up our mouths to your word. Thank you especially Lord, for offering up your Son, on our behalf, as a payment for all of our failures.

Lord, you have given us so much! And you continue to do so, on a daily basis! You shower blessings upon us that far outweigh our needs! We ask for daily bread, and you give us a seven-course meal! We ask for love, and you stretch out your arms wide on the Cross to demonstrate how much we already have. We ask for life, Lord, and you give it to us eternally in your Presence! We are so shortsighted! So please, open our eyes!

Father, you know what blessing we need today, and every day, even better than we do. And you know our hearts, the joys that make us smile, and the troubles that make us cringe. Help us now to celebrate these with you, and to place our trust and our faith in you, and especially to walk with you all the days of our lives. Help us to separate our needs from our wants and desires, Lord, and to prioritize them all in godly ways. And help us to help those who we lift up before you today. Lord, please be with .....

You know how much we love these folks, Lord, and how much we want what is best for each one of them. You know the deep fears and the worries over the trials that they face, as well as the ones that we do too. You also know of the pitfalls that we have, and might stumble upon, as we journey towards becoming more like your Son Jesus Christ. So please Father, reach down and take our hands right now. Lift us up as a Church, as we lift up our prayers in Jesus' Name saying, Our Father...