



**LIVING WORD  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**A Sermon for the  
Sunday Next Before Advent  
Jeremiah 23:5-8 &  
St. John 6:5-14  
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As we come to the last Sunday in the Church Year, I've been reflecting on the scripture passages we've read these last twenty-two weeks of Trinitytide. The first half of the Church Year walks us through the life and ministry of Jesus. The second half, following Trinity Sunday, walks us through the life and ministry of the church. The lessons remind us who we are and encourage us to be the people and the community that Jesus and the Spirit have made us. Last week we were reminded that just as the old temple was the place where Israel found forgiveness and the presence of God, so the church—the new temple—is also to be the place where the world encounters the presence of God and the forgiveness that flows from the cross. On All Saint's, just a few weeks ago, we heard the Beatitudes and were reminded of the character that Jesus and the Spirit have given us. We are the community that is poor in spirit, that mourns sin and the fallenness of the world, the meek who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. And thinking of all that, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Sometimes we fail. A lot of the time it just feels like the pushback against us is overwhelming.

I feel like Israel in the wilderness with temptation after temptation and enemy after enemy. But then I think, wait a minute. Even in the wilderness, God was with Israel. I think of Moses, reiterating the *torah*, the law, to Israel as they were on the verge of finally

entering the Holy Land, and as he called them to commit to the Lord's covenant—and he knew it seemed like an overwhelming thing to them—he said to them: You can do this. It's not too hard. It's not far off. It's not in heaven that you have to go and bring it down. It's not across the ocean, that you've got to send someone far away to fetch it. God's word is *near you*. It's in your heart and it's in your mouth so that you can do it." Even more, there was the Lord, present in a shining cloud of glory right in their midst—always present with them in the tabernacle. Ready to forgive and to purify and to strengthen them to be the people he'd created and called them to be. And if that was true of Israel and of her relationship with God in the *Old Covenant*—well, maybe I shouldn't be so discouraged. Because, in Jesus, God has established something even better. And so I pore over his word, and I pray, and I look forward to Sundays and his invitation to come feast at his Table.

I find hope in the promise in the lesson we read today from Jeremiah. It's a passage I think of a lot. To a people who had failed, to a people broken and being carried off into exile, to a people who had lost his presence, the Lord promised:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land." (Jeremiah 23:5-8)

All of it is important, but the part that really gets me here is that promise that the Messiah would redefine what it meant to be God's people. The Lord's deliverance of Israel from exile was *the thing*, *the event* that defined them as a people. It was *the event* that they could hold onto as proof that the Lord was real and living and active, that he is faithful and worthy of trust. That he makes good on his promises. It was his gracious and loving deliverance of Israel from Egypt that motivated them to return his love and faithfulness with their own devotion and allegiance. And yet, the Lord says, when the Messiah has done his work, it'll no longer be about Egypt and the exodus, but about the deliverance brought by the Messiah. In hindsight, we can say that our existence as the people of God is defined by the cross and the empty tomb—by the body and blood of Jesus the Messiah shed for us. The Passover, the meal that reminded the Jewish people of their identity of God's people, the meal through which each generation participated in that rescue from Pharaoh's bondage, was redefined by Jesus. He took the Passover bread and the Passover wine and redefined them. No longer do they represent deliverance from Egypt, but our deliverance from sin and death by his body broken and his blood poured out. And Brothers and Sisters, in the midst of the wilderness; struggling to keep our baptismal vows to fight the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil; struggling to be faithful stewards of the gospel and the life of the Spirit, it ought to be strengthening to remember both what the Lord has done for us and that he is so closely with us.

This is why the church gives us today's Gospel—the familiar story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. For the last six months the lessons have been exhorting us to take up Jesus' yoke, to take up our crosses and to follow him. And when we forget who we are and what the Lord has done for us it's easy to forget that Jesus has promised his yoke is easy and his

burden is light, and that in taking up our crosses, he walks alongside us bearing his own. He is with us in the wilderness. And that's what today's Gospel is all about. St. John, in the sixth chapter of his Gospel, writes: "Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming to him. 'Where are we going to buy bread,' he said to Philip, 'so that they can have something to eat?' (He said this to test him. He himself knew what he intended to do.) 'Two hundred denarii,' replied Philip, 'wouldn't be enough to buy bread for each of them to have just a little!' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, joined in. 'There's a boy here,' he said, 'who's got five barley loaves and to fish. But what use are they with this many people?' 'Make the men sit down,' said Jesus. There was a lot of grass where they were, so the men sat down, about five thousand in all. So Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them to the people sitting down, and then did the same with the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he called the disciples. 'Gather up the bits and pieces left over,' he said, 'so that nothing is lost.' So they collected it up and filled twelve baskets with the broken pieces of the five barley loaves left behind by the people who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that Jesus had done, they said, 'This truly is the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world. (John 6:5-14)

Now, the lectionary leaves out the first four verses of the chapter. Because of that we miss two important details. The first is the time and the second is the place. John tells us in verse 4 that "the Passover was at hand". Remember again what the Passover was all about. Passover was the annual festival in which the Jews recalled the events of the Exodus—those events that Jeremiah points to as defining the very identity of Israel as the people of God. I'll say it again, because it's important to understand: In the Exodus the Lord had delivered them from their Egyptian slavery, he

had defeated Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, he had given them his law and the tabernacle and had taken up his dwelling in their midst, and he had led them through the wilderness. Each new generation of Jews, as they took part in the Passover meal, became participants in the events of the Exodus, in the establishing of the Lord's covenant. The Exodus, commemorated by the Passover, was the defining event in Israel's life as the people of God. So it's not just at the Last Supper, but throughout his ministry that Jesus takes the Passover and redefines it in terms of himself: his provision for the people, his body and blood, his cross and his resurrection leading a new people in an exodus from sin and death.

The other important detail in those first verses is the place. This took place on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has led the people into the wilderness and he's taken up his seat on a mountain. Again, John stages the story using the imagery of the Exodus. We have a great crowd of people in the wilderness. John wants us to be thinking about Israel in the wilderness. These people are hungry for supper, but there's no food to be had. The only thing missing is the people grumbling to Moses. But *these* people were just hungry to hear Jesus. This time it's Jesus who realises the people's need before they realise it themselves. That's something to take comfort in. Jesus is looking after our needs before know them ourselves.

Jesus turns to Philip and asks what's to be done to feed all these people. Now, Philip—a good Jew whom I'm sure knew his people's story—should have recalled the manna in the wilderness, but he wasn't thinking of Jesus on that level just yet. Andrew, on the other hand, has met a boy who happens to have brought a sack lunch: a couple of fish and five little loaves of bread. Such a little bit of food might as well have bene nothing if you're thinking about distributing it to five thousand people. But I don't

think Andrew would have bothered telling Jesus about this boy and his lunch if he hadn't thought that Jesus could make use of it somehow. What could Jesus possibly do with so little? The situation seemed totally impossible, and yet the Lord had provided for his hungry people in the wilderness all those centuries before. Why not again? And so Andrew gives us a hopeful sign.

Brothers and Sisters, this is how the people of God are called to respond in hopeless situations. This how we're to depend on Jesus as he leads us through the wilderness—when our calling, our task, our vocation, when being the people he's made us seems so hard, when you feel like you can't carry your cross another step. Don't grumble like Israel did. Don't give up on God and put your faith in horses, chariots, foreign kings, and pagan gods like Israel did back in the days of Jeremiah. The Lord has always been faithful to provide and he always will. Andrew knew that. I don't know if Andrew was thinking about it, but I think that as John wrote this, he was thinking about one particular event in Israel's past and about King Hezekiah. The way John tells the story seems to deliberately echo the story of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was also in a hopeless situation. The Assyrians had besieged Jerusalem. The messenger of the Assyrian king called up to Hezekiah's men on the walls of the city that he would destroy them and that it would be because Hezekiah had purged Judah of its altars and shrines to the Assyrian gods. The Assyrian king sent a message to Hezekiah, warning him that the Lord would not be able to deliver him. Hezekiah no doubt had advisers who saw the situation as hopeless. Some would have advised him to surrender to the Assyrians and to bow before their gods. Others would have urged him to form an alliance with the Egyptians, which would have involved their gods as well. To many, it would have seemed

that Hezekiah was out of options. But he knew better. The King took the message from the Assyrian king and went to the temple. He prayed. Sometimes that's all you can do. And the Lord sent the Prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah with a message of reassurance: The king of Assyria will not enter Jerusalem. "I will defend this city to save it for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (Isaiah 19:34). And that very night an angel struck down 185,000 men in the camp of the Assyrians.

Andrew now, like Hezekiah taking Sennacherib's letter to the temple and not knowing what to do, only that the Lord would do *something*, Andrew now brings the boy and his lunch to Jesus. The Lord will provide. Somehow. In some way. And Jesus does just that. He took the bread, gave thanks to God, and started breaking it into pieces and somehow there was still bread in his hands as the baskets began to fill. And the same with the fish. No matter how much Jesus gave out, there was still more in his hands. And everyone—the multiple thousands sitting there on the grass—everyone had their fill. Just like they did in the wilderness after they'd left Egypt. And yet there's an element of the story here that points to this new exodus that's taking shape being even greater than the first. In the first exodus, there was no manna left over. There was always enough to satisfy the needs of the people, but if you tried to gather extra and to keep it, it rotted away and produced worms. In contrast, when Jesus feeds these people in the wilderness, there are twelve basketfuls left over—presumably food the people took home with them to eat and to be reminded the next day of what the Lord had done.

But that's not the only Old Testament echo that John works into the story. Andrew faithfully taking the loaves and fishes to Jesus echoes Hezekiah going before the Lord to ask for a miracle. But as John tells us about

Jesus dividing up the bread and fish, there's an echo of another story the people would have known very well. John, I think, tells the story to deliberately recall the prophet Elisha and, in particular, the events of 2 Kings 4. There was a famine in the land and Isaiah had a band of followers to provide for. A man brought them twenty loaves of bread and a sack of grain, but it wasn't nearly enough to feed Elisha's men. That didn't concern Elisha. He gave the sack of bread to his servant and commanded him to give it to the men so that they could eat. His servant balked at that. "How can I can set this before a hundred men?" he asked. Elisha commanded him again to take it to the men and said, "Thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" And, somehow, the men ate their fill and, just as the Lord had promised, there were leftovers remaining (2 King 4:42-44).

Now, back to our Gospel: The people on that mountain with Jesus put the pieces together: Passover, wilderness, bread from heaven, baskets of leftover bread. And they declare that Jesus is "the prophet who is to come into the world." Jeremiah's new exodus is somehow underway, with Jesus at its head. Their acclamation is taken straight from the Lord's promise to Moses in Deuteronomy 18: "I will raise up a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I commanded him" (Deuteronomy 18:18-19). The new exodus has begun. Jesus is the prophet who was promised, a prophet like Moses, a prophet like Elisha—and yet a prophet even greater. Verse 15 says: "So when Jesus realised that they were intending to come and seize him to make him king, he withdrew again, by himself, up the mountain."

"King" means "Messiah". Now, did the people really understand who and what the messiah was to be? I don't think so. Almost no one fully understood that until after the events

of Jesus' death and resurrection. But that doesn't mean the people that day, filled miraculously with bread and fish, didn't recognise the Messiah in Jesus. All the pieces were there. Here was the good shepherd who cared for the sheep when no one else would. (It's worth noting that when Mark tells this story, he introduces it saying that when Jesus looked out at the crowd, he saw sheep in desperate need of a shepherd.) Here was the prophet who would lead the people like Moses in the long-awaited exodus. If Jesus was those two things, then he also *had* to be the long-awaited branch that Jeremiah had prophesied would come from the root of David. Jesus saw the recognition dawn in their eyes and he withdrew. The time wasn't right. This wasn't how the Messiah was to come into his crown or to take his throne. Nevertheless, as we draw the lines that connect the promises of God in Jeremiah to their fulfilment in John's Gospel, you and I should, ourselves, be overwhelmed by the faithfulness of God. He does what he promises. He will feed us in the wilderness. He will go before us to conquer the promised land.

Brothers and Sisters, the Lord invites us to his table this morning and here we again recall his faithfulness. Here, like the Jews participating in each new generation in the events of the Exodus and finding their place in the people of God, we find our manna in the wilderness, we recall and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and are reminded that we are his people and that, just as was promised so long ago, he has delivered us from our bondage to sin and death. The sheep that were scattered, have been drawn together by the God of Israel. You and I have heard the story of God's faithfulness. We have come to Israel's king and submitted ourselves in faith. And now, here at his Table, we experience his faithfulness ourselves as we eat the bread and drink the wine. Here is our new covenant manna in the wilderness. Finally, having known the faithfulness

of God, we're summoned ourselves to walk in faith, trusting that the Lord will finish what he has begun, that he will do what he has promised.

In our Collect we asked the Lord to "stir up our wills". We may have come to the end of another Church Year, but the story is hardly over. Advent is almost here and with it the reminder that Jesus is coming and that as we wait for him, he's given his Church a mission and his own Spirit to ensure that mission is fulfilled. He has made us stewards of the good news that he is this world's true Lord. We have our own parts to play in this story. And it's not an easy task. But take heart. The fact that the principalities and powers (as Paul described them in that Ephesians passage we read a couple weeks ago), the fact that they're fighting back means that we're precisely where the Lord wants us to be and doing what he wants us to do and the powers of darkness know it and fear what Jesus and the Spirit will accomplish through the church. So don't give up. Don't be afraid. Don't be weary in well-doing. Petition the Lord in faith, knowing that he is faithful to fulfil his promises. Whether it takes a hundred years or a hundred thousand years for the world to answer the king's royal summons to faithful allegiance, he will be with us and he will equip us for every good work. He will feed us in the wilderness and see us through to the promised land.

Let's pray: Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that we may produce abundantly the fruit of good works, and receive your abundant reward, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*