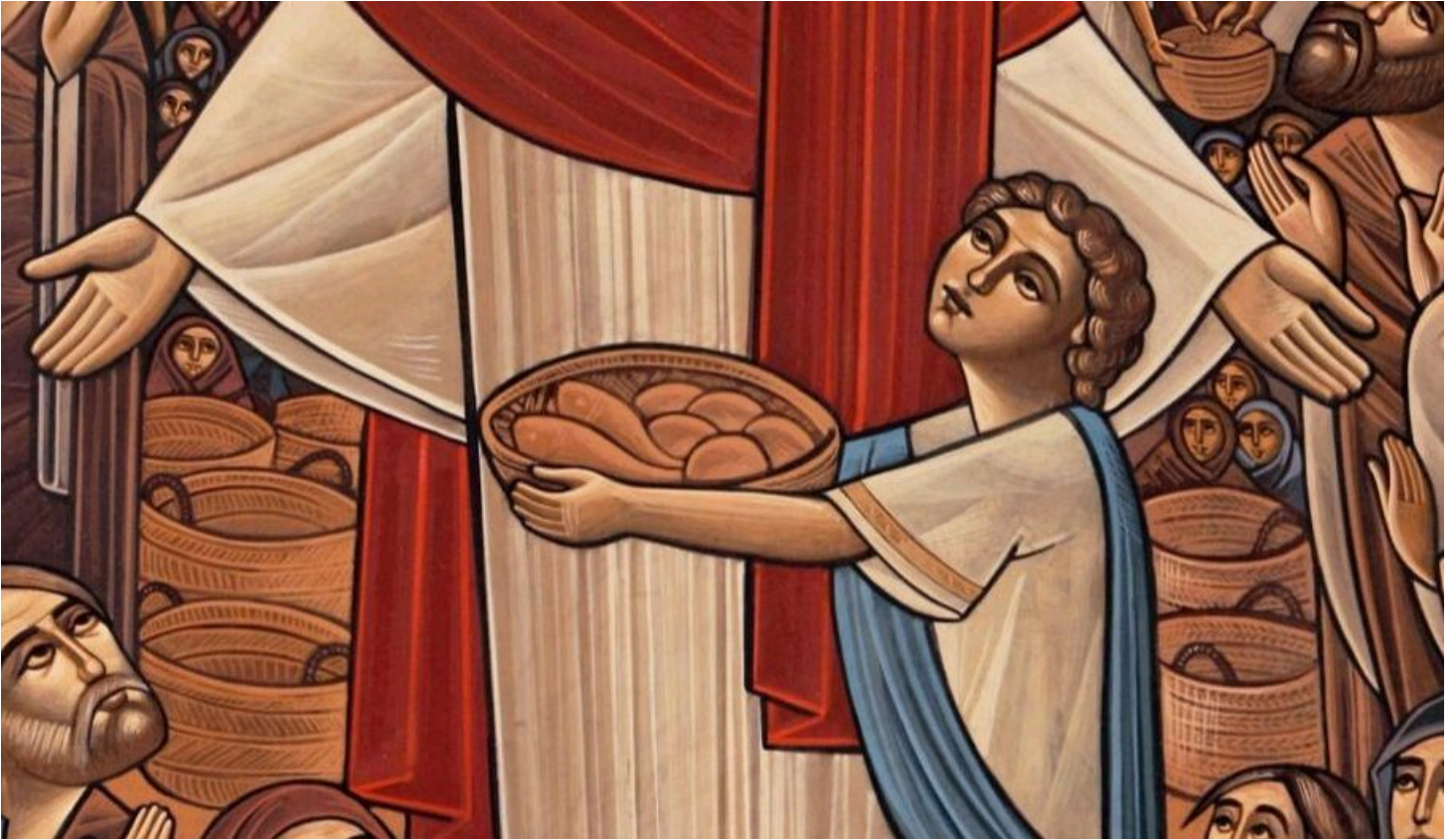


# Something from Nothing?

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Preaching on:

John 6:1–21

I remember being a kid in Sunday School and learning about God. The stuff that interested me the most was God getting her hands dirty in the real world. I loved all the stories about Jesus because they were so real and relatable. But I also loved the stories from Genesis and Exodus and Samuel—floods and plagues and giant slaying and all that good stuff. These are stories designed for the imagination of a little boy, of course, but there was something more there than just great adventures.

God in these stories was not some faraway King sitting on a throne somewhere up in heaven. God was not distant or removed or absent in any way. God was in the world and deeply invested in everything—from the lives and relationships of ordinary people to the politics and history-changing moments of great empires. And God wasn't like the gods we're trying to create for ourselves today through artificial intelligence—our future robot overlords perhaps. God was not logical or cool or measured. God was emotional, mercurial, even violent. God had appetites and, apparently, needs.

God could be offended and would take revenge.

It's a funny thing to have your Sunday School teachers tell you (because it's what we're supposed to believe!) that God is perfect, and then read you some of these stories where God behaves in—certainly impressive, but not always entirely admirable ways. Lucky for me, I didn't need a perfect God. That would have been boring. In these stories, God was worldly. That was what was interesting to me. God was in the world with us. God was invested in us. And God seemed to be responding to us. And zooming out to look at the big picture, as a kid, God seemed to be growing up with me.

When it came time to contemplate God intellectually, to memorize catechisms, to be versed in the basics of Calvin's Institutes, I was not interested at all. I remember being asked a riddle by a teacher once: Could God create a rock so big that even God couldn't move it? I liked riddles, but this one was boring. Where in all those great stories was God ever creating rocks and carrying them around? And where in all those stories was there any suggestion at all that God was infinitely powerful in the first place? An infinitely powerful being coming down to earth and playing at limitations is boring. If you know the whole drama and tension of the story could be erased with a wave of God's magic wand, who cares? If God is infinitely powerful and David defeats Goliath, who cares? If God is infinitely powerful and humbles Pharaoh, who cares? Of course God wins every time. There's never even any question of how it all turns out. But is that life? Is that life as you experience it?

No. And that interpretation, I think, is a betrayal to the experiences of the people actually living those stories out. And it's just not true to our own lives and struggles! How will things turn out? We don't know. We're holding on by our fingernails here. Faith isn't the easy experience of believing that a God who always wins will always win. Faith is the experience of holding on by your fingernails, rooting for the underdog, defying the odds, refusing to give up, refusing to curse God even when God seems to have failed, and to never stop looking for that small, narrow, dimly lit, barely noticed path which God is laying down in the midst of this chaos into what we hope is a better future. That to me is what is truly admirable about God's character in these stories. God is fighting just as hard as we are.

It's not easy reading our kids some of these stories where floods kill everybody or everybody gets covered in boils or giants get their heads cut off. It's far more comfortable to tell them, without any stories, God's in heaven, God loves you, God's perfect, everything always comes out right in the end. That's nice, but it's boring. And how will those teachings really hold up in our children's lives when they face real challenges. Because a perfect, all-powerful God would easily and neatly solve our problems for us from outside the world. But how often have you experienced that? So, the Bible tells us stories about a God whose hands are as dirty and bloody as ours with the hard work of fighting for a way forward inside the world with us.

Fortunately, we have our scripture reading this morning. Nobody's head gets chopped off, but we see the way that God seems to work in the world and in our lives. A large crowd is following Jesus. It's time to eat. Where are we going to get food everyone? A perfect and "all-mighty" God would merely wiggle

his heavenly nose and a banquet table would descend from heaven to feed everyone. And why not? That's a great way to eat, if you can get it. But that's not what happens. And if you pay close attention to the stories of miracles, God very rarely works from nothing. God almost always starts from something, something or someone in the world.

Let's name a few. When the prophet Elijah went to Zarephath during a great famine and asked a widow there to make him some bread, even though she only had enough oil and flour for one last cake before she died, that little bit lasted through the whole long famine and kept them both alive. The wedding at Cana—Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel—the wedding reception runs out of wine. Jesus doesn't create wine from nothing. Jesus has them fill six big cisterns with water—30 gallons each, 180 gallons of water total. That's hard work! They didn't have a garden hose! They had to sweat for that miracle, for that water to become wine. What about David and Goliath? Why didn't God strike down Goliath with a lightning bolt? Well, it would have been a boring story. And it wouldn't have been a true story because bullies and tyrants are rarely overthrown by lightning bolts. It takes the little people of the world to stand up to them. So, God takes a shepherd boy, a sling, and some stones and works with them to win an entirely precarious and unexpected victory. Very often, when Jesus performs a healing he tells the healed person that it was their faith that healed them. We call this today the "placebo effect." It's a scientifically measurable phenomenon. If you give somebody sugar pills and tell them it's medicine, they are more likely to get better than someone who hasn't been given phony medicine. Belief has a measurable healing effect. So, Jesus doesn't heal from nothing, he uses our faith.

Even in the most famous examples of God seeming to create something from nothing, there's always a catch. In Genesis 1, for example, where the interpreters and theologians tell us that God created the cosmos from nothing, the very first line is not about nothing, it's about what was already there when God started the work of creation. The earth was not nothing. It was chaotic, dark, deep waters. Just like today, God didn't create from nothing. Just like today, God created from out of the midst of chaos.

And so, of course, the feeding of the 5,000 begins with a little kid holding five loaves of bread and two fish. And somehow those five loaves and those two fish feed 5,000 people. Did a miracle occur? Yes. Was it impressive? Yes. Was it the work of an almighty, infinite God who acts outside of all limitations? I don't think so. Anyway this isn't the story of a God who can do anything. It's the story of a God who works within the world, alongside us, with the resources and limitations that we face. It's a story about making do with what we have, and multiplying what little we have for the benefit of others. This isn't God showing off infinite power. This is God promising partnership, but needing us to join in, to share what we have, and to trust that together, something beautiful and miraculous can happen.

You and I can't perform miracles. But we can provide the raw materials that miracles are made from. God doesn't work from nothing. And if we don't provide God with something to work with, to work through, it's going to be hard for God's true power to get a toehold on the problems we're facing. We're living in interesting times, where it seems like every other day there is some huge event or revelation in the world that in the past might have defined a whole year or even a whole decade. But they just

keep coming at us recently—year after year of surprise and tragedy and conflict and struggle. One response would be to batten down the hatches and to wait for God to fix everything. Another—to try to reassure ourselves that this too must all be a part of some crazy plan that God's whipped up for purposes we can't yet imagine. But another response, the response of a small child who loves a good story, the response of a small child who is naturally generous and just wants to share what little he has, the response of a small child who has no choice but to believe in the power of small actions, is to offer whatever we have, no matter how insignificant it may seem. And to trust that our small contributions will be multiplied in ways we can't fully understand.

Beloved, we are a part of something greater. Did you hear that? We are a *part* of something greater. Something greater is growing out of us. So, our little bit of bread and fish might just be enough to feed a multitude. Our little sling might be able to bring down a giant. The water I carry by the sweat of my brow may one day turn to wine. So, we can't wait for a distant, perfect solution to descend from on high. Instead, we step forward with what we have, trusting that God will meet us there, to build a future out of our hopes and dreams, our loaves and fishes, our courage and our faith.