

Fourth Sunday in Lent; March 19, 2023
+ John 6:1-14 +
“Jesus Looks at You; Look Up to Him and Enjoy”

After this, Jesus crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A large crowd followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he was performing on those who were sick. Jesus went up on the hillside and sat down there with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a huge crowd coming toward him, he asked Philip, “Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?” But Jesus was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to have just a little.”

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?”

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, so they sat down. There were about five thousand men.

Then Jesus took the loaves and, after giving thanks, he distributed pieces to those who were seated. He also did the same with the fish – as much as they wanted.

When the people were full, he told his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over so that nothing is wasted.” So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

When the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they said, “This really is the Prophet who is coming into the world.”

For those of you who don’t keep track of such things, in under three years you have already heard two sermons about Jesus feeding the five thousand. And that is good; the main point of this story is one that Christians in America in 2023 need to hear more than once: all our doubts about Jesus’ ability to help us, even in the most dire situations, are dead wrong. As the people say at the end of the story, Jesus **“really is the Prophet who is coming into the world.”** The Prophet is the Promised Son of God. When we doubt that Jesus will give us what we need, we doubt God.

Not only is Jesus able to give us what we need, he is able to give us what we need in impossible situations. Jesus knew the answer to his own question: **“Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?”** The answer was nowhere. But they still got what they needed – and way more than they needed – because of Jesus’ power as God.

That’s what you heard, in a nutshell, the last two times. But this time is going to be different. This time we are in Lent. Lent is a somber time, but our Christian fathers who long ago assembled this series of lessons tipped their hand heavily when they named this Sunday “Laetare,” which means, “Rejoice!” They wanted this Sunday to be an island of joy in the dead serious, and often sad, season of Lent. Even during Lent, we should not forget: Christ is risen; our Savior is alive. Today we get a short break from the forward trudge to the cross, the slogging it out through temptation. Today, our Lord tells us to sit down and have our fill. For we are journeying toward eternity with Him. We’re not alone. He goes with us. He leads us. He feeds us and gives us rest and refreshment along the way. All the way there, he is looking at us and caring for us. So we look back to him in joy. Today, let Jesus, who is always looking at you, feed you. And look back to him in joy.

When joy is missing from our hearts, why is that? Now you may be tempted to rattle off a list of all the causes of your problems: you don’t get paid what you deserve, your kids can be little terrors, your furnace is acting up, your favorite team stinks this year, and just keep going. But you could also cite a singular cause for all the lack of joy in the world. It is because of sin—ours or others’. Let’s say you have some problem that’s getting you down, sometimes to the point of despair. It may be that you didn’t cause that problem; so I’m not saying every time you’re downcast it’s the direct or indirect result of your own doing. But it’s all the result of the fall into sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, the sinful, fallen nature entered into the world and was passed on from generation to generation, the way eye-color and height and pre-disposition to certain diseases are passed down. It’s part of our spiritual DNA. As Paul wrote: **One trespass led to the condemnation for all men.** So humanity is fallen; creation is defiled, and we live in a broken, sinful world. You may not have directly caused whatever it is that robs you of joy, but our sinful humanity has brought all of it on all of us. We remain part of the problem.

How joyful do you think the crowd was as it faced the prospect of a long march home, after dark, on empty stomachs? How joyful do you think the disciples were when Jesus tested their faith? Do you see a big smile of Philip’s face when he says, **“Two hundred denarii (I’m guessing that was the total amount of their treasury) would not be enough for each of them to have just a little.”** Do you sense that Andrew is brimming with joy when he says, **“There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what is that for so many people?”** But Jesus looked. He saw. He saw the hungry mass of humanity, and the doubt of his disciples. And he decided it was time to replace it with joy.

Could you find much joy in a crowd of probably 15,000 at least having the rare chance to eat all they want? Food is joy in the hands of the hungry. Can you find much joy in the disciples as they bend down and stuff basket after basket with leftovers, after thousands have filled their stomachs? Not only is their problem solved, but they just got to witness one of the most amazing events in history. On top of that – and much more importantly – they can see that this Jesus who has just given so much is the promised Prophet, the One who comes to give so much more than bread and fish.

Remember, these are the same disciples who witnessed Jesus turn water into wine. These are the same disciples who saw the blind receive their sight, the deaf their hearing, those who could not walk suddenly able to get up and run. These are the same disciples who had heard his teaching and come to faith. Even still, they doubted. They had no idea how so little could satisfy so many. They were downcast. Because Jesus was looking at them, but they weren't looking at him. They were looking at themselves.

Nevertheless, our Lord looked at them with compassion and love, and renewed their joy. And he kept his eyes on them until he turned his eyes up to give thanks. But then, those eyes were right back on the disciples and the thousands of others who needed him. Just him. Turns out, that's all they really needed: just him. Just the Prophet, the Son of God. He was there, so everything they needed was there. And that truth became their joy.

We're not that different from the disciples. We not only know all the miracles Jesus did, but also that he was raised from the dead. Good Friday was not the end of the story. Easter came and the tomb was empty, and that is why Good Friday is good. Even more than that, we have the witness of our own lives. We all have the perspective in hindsight of how God has been at work in our lives. How one problem after another, which we could not see the answer to, God has worked out for us. And yet problems still rise and doubts twist in us and rob us of our joy. We get tired, burn out, and drop into the dumps.

But our Lord is still looking at us with love and compassion. Look back at him, and be filled with joy. He still looks up to his Father and prays that you will have all that you need for this body and life. And so you do. He does not hand it to you personally, but if there is anything you need he will work through his people to supply it; you only have to ask. And some of his people are so perceptive that you won't even have to ask; you'll just have it. Jesus will work through them to get it you. Rejoice that you'll have all you need, and probably a good deal of leftovers besides.

And because Jesus is always looking at us, he is well aware of that root problem that so easily steals our joy. He knows our sin, too. And that is why he came. It was not just to feed bellies with bread and fish. It wasn't even primarily to do that. Jesus came to give total and lasting joy by taking our sin away. The Son of God lived without sin. He died to forgive it all and open up heaven to all who believe, where is always joy, only joy. And he rose to prove the fact of our salvation. He is looking at you with forgiveness, and watching you all the way to your heavenly home where you will have joy forever, and nothing but joy, with him. All the way there, look back at him. And rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Amen.