

SESSION 8: THE MYSTERY OF THE BREAD

COMMIT - DAY 1: APPLICATION OF LOAVES AND FISHES

In the two stories of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, Mark presents his readers with powerful evidence for Christ's divinity. These stories can be found in Mark 6:31-52 and Mark 8:1-21. The first story has obvious allusions to the Exodus story. The people follow Jesus into "a lonely place" (Mark 6:31-32, 35) where there is nothing to eat. The Israelites were also in the desert where there is nothing to eat. In fact, what is why they start to grumble (see Exodus 16:3). When Jesus instructs his disciples to organize the people before serving them (see Mark 6:39-40), his counsel brings to mind Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, who advises Moses to organize the people into groups with leaders for each group so that they can be served effectively and "go to their place in peace" (Exodus 18:23); see Exodus 18:13-27). Mark wants us to see and understand is that Jesus is God, the same who gave bread to his hungry people in the wilderness during the Exodus.

In the second story, we find Jesus again multiplying loaves and fishes. The scene is in many ways similar to the first miracle—a hungry crowd, a compassionate Jesus, the Apostles as ministers – but goes a little quicker. The dialogue is brief. It is almost like Jesus is administering a test and hoping for his students to complete it more quickly and get a better score the second time around.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two stories is what happens afterward. The first narrative is concluded by a theophany of sorts as Our Lord comes down from the mountain and walks on the water. The second miraculous feeding is followed by a short and frustrating encounter with the Pharisees, and frustrating ride with the Apostles.

As his mission progresses, Jesus clearly longs for his disciples to understand who he is. He draws them into conversation, trying to transform their discussion of practical problems into an occasion for deeper faith.

What does he tell them to watch out for? Why would he group Herod and the Pharisees, who seem so far removed from each other? The fact is that both those groups want to see signs, not because they are seeking faith and understanding, but because they want to remain in doubt. Those who seek signs in such a way will never be satisfied.

Even with all this, the disciples themselves struggle to understand. This is clear from their dialogue with Jesus in Mark 8:14-21. They think Jesus is talking about their lack of material bread.

How much bread do they have? What did they do that troubled them?

In a sense, the disciples are blind. They see but do not see, as Isaiah has foretold. "Do you not yet understand? (Mark 8:21). Jesus even has to remind them of his miracles, miracles in which they themselves had a hand. The journey into intimate union with Christ in the New Exodus is not quick and easy. God desires it earnestly, begging us to understand, like a parent who longs for his child to learn something important. Yet he is patient as well. For fallen human nature, it often takes time and repeated encounters with the Lord to come to know him as he is.



Jesus's words and actions at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes not only recall the Exodus, but also look forward to the Eucharist he will institute at the Last Supper. When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread (see Mark 6:41), these are the same actions he will use at the Last Supper. Let us take our study today as encouragement to receive Our Lord in the Eucharist as frequently as possible, recognizing that he is present there. Even if we do not understand fully, we can trust in him to make himself known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Presco in the Greek Orthodox church of the twelve apostles in Capernaum, Israel/ shutterstock.com

COMMIT - DAY 2: JESUS HEALS THE DEMONIAK

Today, we backtrack a little to visit a miracle that takes place prior to the miracles of the multiplication of loaves in Mark's Gospel. The passage is Mark 5:1-20. The story takes place on "the other side" of the Sea of Galilee, in the country of the Gerasenes, near the Decapolis (or Ten Cities), which is a more Gentile region. The story is a sequel to the events recounted in the end of Mark 4. As you may recall, this chapter showed Jesus, who had fallen asleep after an exhausting day of teaching parables, waking to calm the storm with a word. His awestruck disciples wonder who this man can be. Then they reach their destination and witness another demonstration of Jesus's divine power.

It is interesting to note how many times this passage uses the word "beg." Read Mark 5:1-20, paying attention to the following questions: Who begs Jesus? And what do they want? Does Jesus give them what they want?

Who begs Jesus?	What do they want?	Does Jesus give them what they want?

The demoniac lives in a graveyard, possesses incredible strength such that none can subdue him, and goes around yelling and cutting himself. Possessed with an unclean spirit, this man is terrifying as the storm, and even more so. He sees Jesus from afar and comes running. What happens next? Jesus commands the unclean spirit to "come out" (Mark 5:8; note that it is not until we read verse 8 that we understand that the actions of verses 6 and 7 are in response to Jesus's command). In response, the evil spirit has the man "worship" Jesus. The Greek here can have a sense of paying servile tribute, and when the demons respond elusively to Jesus's question for their names and then beg not to be sent out of the country, it is clear that they are not paying the worship of adoring reverence to our Lord. One thing is very clear: Jesus is absolutely in control of the situation. He is giving the commands; he allows the evil spirits to enter into the herd of swine.

Saint Cyril writes, "Consider the unconquerable power of Christ; He makes Satan shake, for to him the words of Christ are fire and flame."

-Thomas Aquinas in *the Catena Aurea*, Mark Chapter 5, Lectio 1

The pigs rush down the steep bank and drown themselves. The herdsman flee and spread the news of the event. People come to see what is happening. The herd of swine was large and their absence was striking. And in place of this messy lot, they find the man clothed and sitting down peacefully. The reason for the transformation is clear: Jesus is there, and the pigs, whose presence indicated a distance from God's Law (see Leviticus 11:7), are gone.

Sadly is the absence of the pigs that seems to bother the people. They beg Jesus to leave. And he goes. Those who ask Jesus, receive. Jesus sends the demons into the pigs and then departs the town as the people had begged him.

The final scene in this story is Jesus preparing to leave. He is getting into the boat, and the healed demoniac is begging to go, too. Mark records that he begged that "he might be with him" (Mark 5:18). Earlier in Mark's Gospel, we are told that Jesus "appointed twelve, to be with him" (Mark 3:14). They key to discipleship. We see this man's new life in the wording his request to Jesus his Lord.

Unexpectedly, Jesus refuses the man's request. Instead, Jesus gives him a mission: a vocation to preach the Good News: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). The man does as Jesus direct. He proclaims Jesus and his mighty deeds in the Decapolis (Mark 5:20).

Look up Mark 7:31-37. What kind of a reception does Jesus receive when he returns to the Decapolis?

COMMIT - DAY 3: LECTIO: WALKING ON THE SEA

Jesus as God gave manna in the wilderness. Jesus multiplies bread to feed the people, and later will give himself in the Eucharist. Directly following the first miracle of the multiplication, Jesus shows his divinity in another manner. Jesus's walking on the water may be one of the moments in our lives, as well as in the lives of our fellow Christians.

LECTIO: The practice of praying with Scripture begins with an active and close reading of the Scripture passage. Read the verse below and then answer the questions to take a closer look at some of the details of the passage.

"Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of the, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were distressed in rowing, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; have no fear.' And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. –Mark 6:45-52

What was Jesus's first action after dismissing the disciple and the crowd?

Notice how many times Mark makes reference to location. What location is noted for Jesus and/or the disciples in each verse below? Where is Jesus at the beginning of the story? Where is he at the end?

	What location is mentioned?
Mark 6:45	
Mark 6:46	
Mark 6:47	
Mark 6:48	
Mark 6:49	
Mark 6:51	

How are the disciples described before and after Jesus gets into their boat?

MEDITATIO: *Lectio*, a close reading and rereading is followed by *meditation*, a time to reflect on the Scripture passage and to ponder the reasons for particular events, descriptions, details, phrases, and even echoes from other Scripture passages that were noticed during *lectio*. Take some time now to meditate on the above verse.

“The disciples indeed, who were still carnal, were amazed at the greatness of His virtue, they could not yet however recognize in Him the truth of the Divine Majesty. Wherefore it goes on, ‘For their hearts were hardened.’ But mystically, the toil of the disciples in rowing, and the contrary wind, mark out the labors of the Holy Church, who amidst the beating waves of the world, and the blasts of unclean spirits, strives to reach the repose of her celestial country. And well is it said that the ship was in the midst of the sea, and He alone on land, for sometimes the Church is afflicted by a pressure from the Gentiles so overwhelming, that her Redeemers seems to have entirely deserted her. But the Lord sees His own, toiling on the sea, for, lest they faint in tribulations, He strengthens them by the look of His love, and sometimes frees them by a visible assistance. Further, in the fourth watch He came to them as daylight approached, for when man lifts up his mind to the light of guidance from on high, the Lord will be with him, and the dangers of temptations will be laid asleep.”

-Bede, quoted by Thomas Aquinas in *Catena Aurea*.

Twice Mark says Jesus was walking on the sea.” How do the following Old Testament verses describe God’s power over nature?

Job 9:8	
Psalm 65:5-8	
Psalm 107:28-29	
Proverbs 8:29	
Proverbs 30:3-5	

Egō eimi – Greek phrase meaning “I AM” (see Exodus 3:14; 6:2; Deuteronomy 32:39). Christ’s words to the frightened disciples present the “egō eimi” as the keystone of comfort. Situated in between “take heart” and “have no fear,” the “I AM” statement assures us of who Jesus is and of the Divine Presence, which allows us to have faith and not fear.

ORATIO, CONTEMPLATIO, RESOLUTIO: Having read and meditates on today’s Scripture passage, take some time to pray – bringing your thoughts to God (*oratio*) – and to be receptive to God’s grace in silence (*contemplation*). Then end your prayer by making a simple concrete resolution (*resolution*) to respond to God’s prompting of you heart in today’s prayer.

COMMIT - DAY 4: SEEING, HEARING, AND UNDERSTANDING

Throughout this week, we have been considering the miracles of the multiplication of loaves and fishes and Jesus’s walking on the water, and the revelation of Christ’s divinity that these events contain. We saw the theophany at sea that followed the first miracle and the conversation at sea, which followed the second miracle. Yet we did not see an “aha” moment for the disciples. Sadly, the disciples fail to understand. They are blind to what they see and deaf to what they hear. The gospel writer records that their blindness is caused by their hardness of heart.

What do you think is needed to resolve the problem for the disciples? Why are hardness of heart and understanding connected?

Hardness of heart, blindness, lack of understanding. These are all themes from the Servant Songs of Isaiah. And if we look at these texts, we can gain a sense of what is needed to change the hard hearts that do not understand the Divine Presence.

There are four Servant Songs found in chapters 42-53 of Isaiah. These verses manifest that Israel was called to be God’s servant. The Chosen People were supposed to glorify him, to worship him alone, to make him known among the nations as the one true God. “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6).

The prophet expresses this in verses that are filled with repeated “I AM” statements. Read the following passage and circle every time you see an “I AM” statement.

“You are my witnesses,’ says the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me, I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior, I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,’ says the Lord. ‘I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I word and who can hinder it?’” - Isaiah 43:10-13

When God's people were in slavery, God worked mighty signs so that they would know and believe in the one true God, the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob God delivered his people from slavery and then entered into a covenant relationship with them, desiring to dwell in their midst. It was the glory of these deeds and the intimacy of this relationship that Israel was to make known among the nations as God's servant.

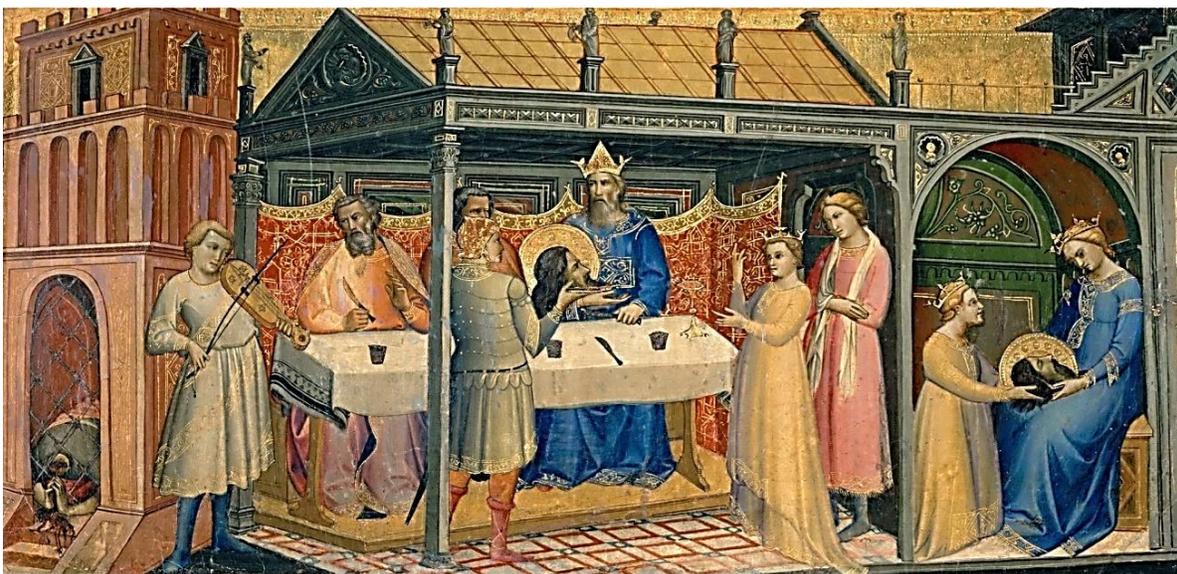
However, as Isaiah also makes clear, Israel often was a disappointment in the servant department. Note the poetic irony of the statement, "Who is blind but my servant"? (Isaiah 42:22). Fortunately for Israel, God has every intention of helping them. And there is a Servant of God who can make up for Israel's failures.

"And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength – he says: 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'"
-Isaiah 49:5-6

It is by the suffering of this Servant that redemption takes place. Through an amazing process of having trust in a time of tribulation, the people of God receive the opportunity to recognize God's love. The trust exhibited by Jesus in his Passion and shared with his followers truly turns the darkness into light. Jesus's suffering unmasks sin for what it is, and shows his tremendous love.

Finally in Jesus's Death and Resurrection, when the faithful Servant gives himself in love and rises with glorified wounds, there is a stunning revelation of divine power and love. "[S]o shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand" (Isaiah 52:15). Understanding Jesus's Paschal Mystery is truly necessary for one to understand God. For it is in the Paschal Mystery that our eyes, ears, and hearts encounter the depths of the love of God, who is Love.

COMMIT – DAY 5: TRUTH AND BEAUTY



The Banquet of Herod,

Lorenzo Monaco, ca 1387-1388, Louvre Museum, Paris, France

Lorenzo Monaco (ca. 1370-1425), born Piero di Giovanni, was an early fifteenth-century Florentine painter and manuscript illuminator. Lorenzo was a monk of the Camaldolese order and was permitted to live and operate a workshop outside his monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Lorenzo's *The Banquet of Herod* is one of likely four paintings that made up a predella, which is the base of an altarpiece often decorated with smaller paintings.

Word of the many healings and exorcisms worked at the hand of Jesus and his Apostles eventually makes its way to Herod. Speculation abounds as people attempt to explain Jesus's mighty powers, with some suggesting John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. As Herod muses over what he has been hearing, the Gospel recounts the tragic story of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist in Mark 6:14-29.

Herod holds a banquet in celebration of his birthday to which he invites "his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee" (Mark 6:21). His wife Herodias's daughter came in and danced, which pleased Herod and his guests. The king, who has likely had much wine by this time, makes a rash vow: "Whatever you ask of me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom" (Mark 6:23). At her mother's prompting, she requests the head of John the Baptist.

In his *The Banquet of Herod*, Lorenzo Monaco gives us the next three scenes in the story. On the left, behind the prison iron work is the headless body of John the Baptist, his hands still piously folded as he beseeches the Lord in the last moment of his life on earth.

As we move to the right, the central and largest image is of the banquet hall in which we find Herod and his guest. We are able to see into the room since Lorenzo has removed the front and side walls. The banquet room is richly decorated with a lavish tapestry woven with golden thread wrapping the room. A musician plays for their entertainment, perhaps the same musician to whose music Herodias's daughter danced. Herod is clearly identifiable by his brilliant blue robes and golden crown. A soldier, having executed the king's command, has entered the room to present the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

As we move to the far right, we see Herodias in a side room, dressed in the same royal blue as her husband, a simple crown upon her head. Herodias receives the head of John the Baptist from her daughter, who looks pleased to have fulfilled her mother's request.

Lorenzo Monaco gives us an amazing amount of architectural variety and detail in this painting. The prison, with its solid multi-tiered tower, stands in contrast to the palace's slender posts that allow us into the banquet room. The palace's exterior is ornately decorated with statues lining the rooftop and reliefs on the gable and above the arches. On the walls of the palace rooms, we see inset paneling of various colors, and a geometric pattern plays across the floor. All this detail is presented in a variety of luminous colors.

In these rooms, Lorenza presents us with the characters of the story. The graceful sway of the musician's stance, the playful position of Herodias's daughter's arms recalling her performance, and the various emotions shown on the faces of all present bring the story to life.

Saint Mark tells us that once he hears the request for John's head, Herod was "exceedingly sorry." We see this sorrow, concern, and even dread on Herod's face as he is presented with John's head. We are told that he gives in to the request because of "his oaths and his guests" (Mark 6:26).

Look up James 3:5-8. How does James describe the tongue?

Look up the following verses. What comparison is made between men/authorities and Jesus?

John 12:42-42 _____

Matthew 22:16 _____

Herod lets his tongue run loose, boasting that he will give whatever is asked, “even half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:23). Herod’s vow is made in the presence of his “officers and the leading men of Galilee,” and it quickly becomes clear that he holds their regard highly and desires to be held high in their esteem. As a result, he consents to the request for John’s head. His sorrow at the request reveals that Herod recognizes the wrong of such an action, but just as he disregards God’s Law in marrying Herodias, so now also he is unable to choose right action.

Herod’s actions stand in stark contrast to John the Baptist, a faithful servant of God who speaks the truth. This detailed account of God’s faithful servant suffering at the hand of a wicked king would have certainly been an encouragement to Mark’s audience, many of whom faced martyrdom at the hand of the wicked Roman king Nero.

Take a moment to journal your ideas, questions, or insights about this lesson. Write down thoughts you had that may not have been mentioned in the text or discussion questions. List any personal applications you gained from the lessons. What challenged you the most in the teachings? How might you turn what you’ve learned into specific action?
