

With 5 barley loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds 5,000 men not counting women and children. In some ways, the story looks back to the Old Testament.

- Based on the timing we are reminded of Moses. In the Gospel of John, the time is just before the Feast of the Passover. Following the original Passover, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery and into the desert. The vast multitude in the desert was hungry and the Lord provided manna. God cares for his people and wants to provide food for them in the wilderness. In the desert, the people collected the manna in the morning so they would have food for the day. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus is concerned that nothing is wasted and has all of the leftovers collected.
- Based on the location, we are also reminded of Moses. Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments which provided direction for the spiritual needs of the Israelites. Jesus went up the mountain with the disciples. As he sees the large group following him, he sees sheep without a shepherd and wants to teach them.
- Based on the green grass, we are reminded of Psalm 23. “The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down ... he restores my soul” (1, 2a, 3a). As Jesus prepares to feed them, he instructs them to recline on the grass. He will feed body and soul.
- Based on the barley loaves, we are reminded of Elisha. In 2nd Kings, Elisha feeds more than 100 men with just 20 barley loaves. “His servant objected, ‘How can I set this before a hundred?’ Elisha again said, ‘Give it to the people to eat, for thus says the LORD: You will eat and have some left over’” (4:42-44). In John’s Gospel, Jesus feeds a far larger number with far fewer barley loaves, but there is still an abundance of leftovers that are collected into the 12 wicker baskets.

The feeding of the multitudes also looks forward to Christianity and the celebration of Eucharist. “Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining” (Jn 6:11).

- The feeding of the 5,000 looks forward to Holy Thursday and the Lord’s Supper. “In order to leave them a pledge of this love, in order never to depart from his own and to make them sharers in his Passover, he instituted the Eucharist as the memorial of his death and Resurrection and commanded his apostles to celebrate it until his return” (CCC 1337).
- “The miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves ... prefigure the superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist” (CCC 1335).
- In the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, “Jesus gives the bread to the disciples, who then feed the crowds. But John does not mention any role of the disciples; Jesus feeds the crowd directly. John thus underscores that Jesus is the ultimate source of the bread for the crowd.”ⁱ
- As we pointed out, the timing of the feeding before Passover looks to the past, but it looks forward as well. “By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus’ passing over to his Father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom” (CCC 1340).

Each Gospel story of Jesus is rich in meaning. When we eat an ordinary meal, we are often hungry soon after. When we reflect on the word of God, we are often fed in a way that leaves us nourished in mind and spirit and at the same time hungering for more. “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4b).

ⁱ Martin, Francis; Wright, William M. IV. The Gospel of John. Pg. 115.