

Title: Abundant Seeing

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Scripture: [Psalm 122](#)

Text: [Luke 9:10-17](#)

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"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1) It is a pilgrim Psalm, one of 15 Psalms of ascent that those traveling to Jerusalem for the three great Jewish festivals would recite. I thought about it last Sunday when we were living out this Psalm. We were standing on the southern staircase, what some call the

magnificent staircase because it is 200 feet wide, an incredible piece of architecture, created by Herod in the Temple expansion. You get a sense of its enormous scale by a group picture that was taken. We look tiny compared to its expanse. But that doesn't do it justice because our picture shows only part of the wall. You can't even see the full width of the wall, stairs or gates.

The southern stairs led to massive double gates and are uniquely designed. There are 30 steps with landings interspersed to create a walking cadence to go along with the Psalms of ascent, Psalms 120-134. Pilgrims could let the pace of their climb guide their recitation as they slowly and respectfully approached the gates of the temple mount and then, on to the temple itself. In front of the steps were ritual baths, "mikvas" where the pilgrims would bathe to be



ceremonially clean before worship. Some believe that it was at this very site that Pentecost took place, with the mikvas used to baptize 3,000 new believers in Jesus. Looking around, I was overwhelmed thinking of the millions of pilgrims that had climbed those stairs for Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, thinking of the boy Jesus approaching with his parents, of Jesus climbing with his disciples three times a year, and then, considering the millions and millions of pilgrims that have since come back on their own Holy Land pilgrimages.

For those new today, I am just back from leading from a Holy Land pilgrimage. Nineteen of us were on those steps and all of us were overwhelmed by the scale. Imagine a blown up Lucas Oil stadium, five times the length and twice the width and you begin to get an idea of the size. Surrounding the Temple Mount was a wall over 100 feet high. You could put 22 football stadiums within it. The height of the 2nd temple was taller than our stadium by nearly fifty feet. It is enormous.

The whole trip was bigger than life, a visual abundance of seeing. I am grateful that I experienced it for the first time with some of you. They will tell you what I also feel. The experience is hard to describe. We can tell you what we did but it doesn't really articulate what we experienced. We visited the hometown of Mary Magdalene and sailed on the Sea of Galilee. We saw a first century "Jesus boat" and visited Qumran, where ancient manuscripts were found that literally changed our Bible. We worshiped and sang at the Garden Tomb and at Abu Gosh, one of the places considered to be the site of Emmaus Road. We renewed our baptisms at the Jordan.

We were overwhelmed by the experience of walking in the footsteps of Jesus, inspired by groups of pilgrims from all over the world, singing and praising God in their own languages, often in competition with us. And we ate. There was an abundance of food. We ate a lot, a Mediterranean diet that was more than abundant. I'll admit that the buffets which we had at nearly every meal were overflowing with everything, except bacon. There was no pork. At least one in our group said he was stopping on the way home from the airport for a bacon cheeseburger.

We enjoyed one another around the table. Sharing food and conversation about the day was life-giving, occasions of knowing and being known, times when deep friendships were firmly formed. We journeyed to see the place of Jesus and discovered together something important to Jesus, food, drink, and table.

Jesus enjoyed being with people around a table with good food and drink, so much so that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He seems to be invited to attend more dinners than he entertained in his home in Capernaum, a place which we also saw. But on those occasions when he does host a meal, the food seems to take on new significance, something more than food, abundantly larger than just a meal.

In today's text, we have an occasion where Jesus is the host. Our long table set for 19 in the dining rooms of our hotels did not compare to the number of people that Jesus hosts. Scripture tells us that he fed 5,000, plus women and children. No one knows for sure how big a crowd that was but any way

you look at it, it is massive. It was a miracle so important to the early church that it holds the distinction of being found in all four gospels. That makes it a rare story, one revered by the early church. It is commemorated by a chapel, the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes upon which the 4th-century Byzantine church at a place called Tabgha. No one claims that is the exact spot. But for nearly 1700 years, people have traveled there to remember the story as well as another meal which took place nearby. I'll get to that in a moment. Before we do, let's consider this miracle first.

Luke says, "The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place" (Luke 9:12) Each of the gospels tells the same story even if how they get to the deserted, lonely place is different. Our tour guide said that there were a number of places in Galilee where research shows that a natural megaphone is formed by the landscape, a place where Jesus voice could easily be heard by such a large crowd. Acoustics that good likely amplified the concern of the disciples who wanted to send away the crowd. Clearly, they didn't have the capacity to see how it would be possible to feed so many. But Jesus wants them to see abundance, not scarcity. So he challenges them. "But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." (Luke 9:13)

They answer quickly, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish— unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." (Luke 9:11) Wait a minute you say, I thought that it was the boy that had five loaves and two fish. That's John telling of the story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke suggest that it was the disciple's provisions and they knew exactly what they had before Jesus even responded. Their answer was premeditated, premeditated scarcity. In advance, they had clearly already assessed the situation and anticipated Jesus challenge. They had taken stock of their provisions and quickly come up the decision that what they had wouldn't do much good. They were not in the position to feed anyone, let alone a big crowd. So they tell Jesus, "Send them away and let someone else who has more than we have to take care of them. We don't have enough." It was premeditated scarcity.

But Jesus didn't come to preach a gospel of scarcity. He is about all abundance and said so "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) This is a perfect opportunity to demonstrate this. You take what you have. You place it before God. You bless it. You break it. And you share it so that they can eat. Take, bless, break, share, and eat.

They were about to see God work the miracle of abundance and experience a foreshadowing of his Last Supper.

The disciples divided the 5000 people into smaller, more manageable groups of 50. Accomplishing this was probably a miracle in itself. Throughout our pilgrimage, we were constantly working on keeping 19 together, counting heads over and over. We watched groups, larger than ours struggle. It is hard to manage groups of people, particularly a group of 50. But somehow, it miraculously happens. Note that Jesus doesn't ask people to line up. There weren't any directions about who got served first or recruitment of volunteers to distribute the food. It just happens, in groups of fifty where strangers dined together as a family, sharing food and conversation about the day, a time of knowing and being known.

I thought about this on that hillside near the Sea of Galilee, where the Church of the Multiplication sits. I imagined scattered groups of people, sitting by the olive grove watching the sun go down. Others, perched on rocks, dangling their feet in the sea. Still, other groups starting a fire by the Sea of Galilee perhaps to grill the fish that was shared. Volunteers moving back and forth between the groups, giving out food. No one appearing to notice that when the baskets left each group of 50, there were leftovers. All ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. One basket for each of the 12 disciples.

So how did that happen? No one knows for sure. If Jesus could turn 6 jars of water into wine...and yes, we visited Cana...he could easily turn a few loaves of bread and fish into a banquet for thousands of people. But maybe an even greater miracle than simply multiplying loaves and fish might have taken place, the miracle of abundant seeing. Some think that is what really happened and it comes from a clue that John gives us in his telling of the story.

John's gospel tells us it was Passover season. That means that this crowd was on their way to Jerusalem. Within in a matter of days, they would be on the magnificent staircase saying, "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" It was a four or five-day walk. You don't set out with your family on a journey like that without food, without provisions. There was likely a lot of food among them but they needed Jesus' encouragement to see that there was an abundance, more than enough to share. Sometimes, you need to experience the abundance of Jesus before you can abundantly see to share.

I think that is what might have happened and I think it is no less of a miracle because too often we don't experience the abundance of Jesus that

allows us to abundantly see to share. This came to mind in a new way while visiting Tabgha because less than 100 feet from the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes is another church, The Church of the Primacy of St. Peter. It sits close to the shore and commemorates a fire by which fish and loaves were served. This time, there wasn't a crowd. Just seven disciples, the perfect number to run that Galilean fishing boat that we saw. Jesus again is the host, cooking breakfast for the seven who have spent all night experiencing scarcity. There were no fish in their nets. But when Jesus shows up and tells them to cast on the other side, suddenly they have more than they can haul in. Scarcity becomes abundance.

Do you remember what happens? Jesus and Peter have a conversation around that campfire. Peter is clearly embarrassed having denied knowing Jesus three times just four days earlier. His sin was ever before him, the betrayal as thick as the smoke coming off that fire, their relationship impoverished by Peter's failure and desertion. Jesus, hosting a meal, offers him the experience of grace, an abundance of grace, giving him the opportunity to profess his love an equal number of times to his betrayal. Do you love me? Yes, Lord, I love you. I love you. You know I love you so that he can experience forgiveness and grace. What do you do when you experience the abundant grace of Jesus? Jesus tells us. He says, "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." It sounds a lot like, "You give them something to eat" doesn't it?

No one claims that it is the exact spot. But for over a 1000 years, people have traveled there to remember the story as well as the feeding of five thousand. I found it fascinating because I have never connected the two but now I always will. You can't see abundance if you haven't experienced abundance, the abundant grace of Jesus.

Most people don't get this. They think that we share out of our personal abundance, out of the leftovers that we have to give. But we actually give out of our poverty, the poverty of our sin, out of the brokenness of our transgressions that God addressed when he sent Jesus to offer grace. When you experience that abundant grace, you have to give them something to eat. You must feed his sheep.

It is a good thing to remember as we near the season of Thanksgiving, good stories to latch onto when as we begin our ministries to those hungry and in need in our community. There is enough even when we don't think that there is. Some had bread, some had fish and before you know it, 5,000 men plus the women and children traveling with them were fed, enough with leftovers, an abundance which all can see.

I hope we can see abundantly that others might be able to experience abundance seeing. It's our challenge over the next seven weeks of our holiday ministries. How you respond says something about how you experience Jesus when he says, "You give them something to eat."