

“A Feast in the Wilderness” - Katy Fazio 7/21/24

Mark 6:30-46

Our story today is one of the many stories where Jesus is doing some “son of God” stuff while his disciples are, like, totally burnt out from traveling and doing crowd control for the Messiah. In so many gospel stories, the writers emphasize that *masses and masses* of people are following Jesus around, trying to get to where they think he might be next, pulling at his clothes, begging him to save them. Hosanna, Lord, save us. Heal us, touch us, forgive us. There is so much pain and longing in Jesus’s world, just like there is in ours.

And the disciples are constantly trying to be like, “Give the Lord some space, Jesus needs to breathe and eat too.” They’re trying to protect Jesus, but Jesus makes it *so hard!* He’s constantly waving them off, letting the beggars and the children and the lepers and the women crowd around him. He has this endless compassion, endless Love, that he just can’t help himself but reach out. To heal. To feed. To teach. To save.

In this story, though, Jesus is recognizing that the disciples don’t have his same stamina, and he’s trying to get them some rest and relaxation because Mark says, “so many people had been coming and going they didn’t have a chance to eat. ”

So they go in a boat to get to a remote place- kind of like a little spiritual retreat? The disciples are finally gonna get this one on one time - or one on twelve time- with Jesus, just hanging out and sharing food together, like it was back before life got so busy. I imagine the disciples as a band of kids all packed up for a field trip to the beach.

You know they've got their streaks of sunblock on their cheeks and their bags packed with the frisbees and hacky sacks, just really ready for that break from the stress of this ministry.

But the crowds rush ahead of them and you know the disciples are like, giving each other really meaningful eye contact, like, we're not singing kumbaya with Jesus this weekend huh?

Here's what The Message translation says; "When Jesus arrived, he saw this huge crowd. At the sight of them, his heart broke—like sheep with no shepherd they were. He went right to work teaching them."

Jesus can't help himself; he teaches them for hours and hours until finally the disciples who are probably lightheaded from the sun and lack of rest say, "Jesus, it's about time to wrap this up right? These people are starting to look hungry, tell them to go into the town and buy dinner, if we hurry..... and get back on the boat....."

.....maybe we can still make smores!" Poor guys. You've gotta feel for the disciples, right? They can't catch a break.

You all know this part of the story pretty well I think. There are 5000 people, only two fishes and five loaves of bread to feed the crowd. Jesus blesses the food, and everybody eats their fill, and the disciples collect 12 baskets of leftovers. A miracle of abundance. Scholars connect this story back to the miracle of manna in the wilderness, which was when God created the sabbath for the Israelites, a practice that declared that the truth about the world is not endless toil, but sacred rest. Not scarcity, but abundance. Not isolation, but community. And so on this day, Jesus and 12 exhausted, sun burnt disciples took

their last bit of energy and their last bit of food and set a feast for the hungry.

The Lectionary cuts off the story here. But the very next verse is this:

“As soon as the meal was finished, Jesus insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead across to Bethsaida while he dismissed the congregation. After sending them off, he climbed a mountain to pray.”

Here’s the good news that the Lectionary leaves out: The disciples *do* get their rest. Jesus probably knows that if he goes with them, the crowd will follow. We can only imagine how long Jesus spends with the congregation, shaking hands, kissing cheeks, wiping tears away. When everybody is gone, he goes to pray.

As I was preparing for this sermon I started to wonder what Jesus said when he prayed. Was it always easy for Jesus to pray, or, like me, did he sometimes struggle to find the words to say? Did it sometimes feel pointless? Did it sometimes feel forced?

In seminary there are many many moments of silence. Theology professors, preachers, seminarians. Everybody loves to take a minute to *pause and reflect*, and *check in with your breath*. There was one day in my first semester of seminary - Derry was 11 months old, still waking up 4 or 5 times a night, I was drained, exhausted, trying to figure out how to be a student again, cherishing the opportunity to take a break from mothering and at the same time I was just in agony with missing him.

And on this particular morning I had been *invited* to sit in silence in my first two classes, and then *again* at a community worship service

and... Church, I just about lost my mind. While everybody was sitting serenely in silent prayer, presumably communing with God, I was basically fuming with rage. I whipped out a notebook and scribbled furiously that sometimes silence is not self care and sometimes actually what is called for is action, and sometimes actually sitting alone with your thoughts just. makes. people. feel. worse.

I'm not knocking meditation, it's been a deeply helpful practice for me at times. But at this moment, like the disciples, I was completely burnt out by the responsibilities of being a new student and a new mom. I was in a season in my life when I just could not regulate my nervous system simply by sitting in silence and breathing. I needed more help.

I had early classes that semester, and I was taking the 6:45 commuter rail train into the city. So I got into the practice of sitting in Marsh Chapel early, when usually nobody else was there. The lights in the Chapel were off, but sun shone through the stained glass, dimly illuminating a massive, breathtaking image of Christ in Majesty, sitting 30 feet above my head. And I was too exhausted to come up with my own words to pray. But after 30 years of Sunday school, bible camp, and church, there were words ready at hand.

“God is my shepherd, I won't be wanting. I won't be wanting.
He makes me lie in fields of green, quiet streams¹”

Almost every morning of my first semester I showed up to sing alone in the chapel. Sometimes just a line from a hymn, sometimes a whole camp song... sometimes this led to more spoken prayer or written prayer. But the showing up of it, the routine of it, grounded me. I had found the tool I needed.

¹Song by Jon Foreman, “House of God, Forever,” based on Psalm 23

And it occurs to me that Jesus also had words at the ready. Like us, Jesus had the psalms to pray when he was too exhausted to come up with his own words. Maybe after taking pity on that crowd that seemed like a flock without a shepherd, he went up and prayed, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Maybe the disciples even, after witnessing yet another miracle when they were at the very end of their rope, prayed together, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me.”

Our ministry, all the good work done in each of our churches, is sustained through spiritual practice. Through the practices of prayer, song, communion, coffee hour, rest, joy. These practices feed us in the desert. And God has set a feast for us. While writing this sermon I started asking people in person and online, what spiritual practices sustain you? I heard,

- Walking my dog in nature,
- music,
- gardening
- meeting my neighbors,
- attending worship,
- praying scripture,
- Showing up at a weekly protest for a free Palestine
- seeking out things to appreciate in others, and then telling them and watching joy spread
- Silliness
- Acknowledging the flowers
- Mantra
- Slowing down and being quiet
- Committing to regular connection with friends
- The act of creating

I noticed that people described spiritual practices that were both individual and communal. That we need both the practice of going up a mountain to pray alone, but also going away with 11 of your closest friends to recharge so you can carry on the good work. That seems right to me. Sometimes I need to sit alone in a chapel and sing and pray, but I also need to know that my voice is not the only one. When we show up to the contemplative practices group on Sunday mornings, or to Nourish, or share at the Beth-El table, or take communion, we are sustaining this tender loving community at the same time that we sustain our own tender hearts. We can take practices from church home, but we can also bring practices from home to church. These practices are not a life hack to be able to grind ourselves harder at work or school. Even though we might be physically alone while we walk in the woods, one thing that all spiritual practices have in common is that they connect us to the divine in us, which connects us to every living thing. They welcome the spirit of the Living God to fall afresh on us. They affirm that we are more than our productivity, more than our skills, more than what we can provide. We are God's children, created in Love, for Love.

We were never meant to do this life alone, beloved. So let's move into a time of prayer as we sing the invitation to prayer together