

# Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

## John 6:1-21

Year B, Season of Pentecost

Proper 12, Ordinary Time 17

Sunday Between July 24 and July 30 Inclusive

8th Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Continuing my vow not to rant about the illogical choices the designers of the Lectionary made that present such challenges for preachers, I'll not comment on the sudden switch from Mark to John for 5 Sundays, as though the two were inter-changeable, which they're not; nor will I comment on trying to preach on a single lesson that contains two stories, each of which deserves its own reflection.

As always, Malina and Rohrbaugh (see link at bottom) come to our rescue with useful background.

Even if we hadn't been told already, by Verse 2 our ears should suddenly start tingling with alarms that we have switched from Mark to John. The trigger for this is the word "signs."

This word ought to warn us that from now on everything we are going to read is not merely an "event," not merely something that happens - even if it is a miraculous happening. From now on everything we are going to read is a **SIGN**. That is, something that points to another reality, a hidden truth that is in plain sight. (See my [Introduction to John](#) for further comments about the crucial importance of signs in John.)

It is a complete mis-reading of John to get stuck on the "miraculous," non-scientific nature of the events he is about to describe. To do so would be like spending an evening in a fabulous restaurant reading the menu and never enjoying the delicious food. These are signs. They point to a feast. Eat; don't just read.

Verse 3. Mountains are wild and dangerous places. Decent people never went there. Bandits live there. And wild animals. And evil spirits. But also, mountains are "thin" places, holy places, places where God is encountered.

Verse 4. This is the second annual Passover mentioned in John. Again, this is a trigger word, and ought to alert us that something is going to happen that will foreshadow the glory of God that will be finally revealed at the third Passover (what we Christians now call Holy Thursday and Good Friday).

Verse 5. Bread is another trigger word in John. Notice that Jesus asks a question about **WHERE** bread can be bought, but Philip responds about the **PRICE**. If Philip had been paying attention he would have passed Jesus'

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pop quiz, because he would have known both **WHERE** the bread of life comes from, and at what **PRICE**. The rest of the story is a sign that points to where the bread of life comes from.

There is a lot going on in this story.

The fact that 5,000 men plus an unknown number of women and children had left their towns and villages to travel into the wilderness to be with Jesus is an indication of his growing fame. (And may be an exaggeration, since a crowd of that size would be larger than most cities in Jesus' time.)

The only other time these people would have left their homes would be to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. That John has them come to be with Jesus suggests Jesus as an alternative to the Temple - and to the Jerusalem ruling elite.

Verse 9. Andrew's question:

What are (five loaves and two fish) among so many people?

is a warning for us to open our eyes, hearts, and minds to really SEE what is going to happen next.

*Aside. Remember. This is sign; it points to something else. The story doesn't actually say there were **ONLY** 5 loaves and two fish among all those people; that no one else had any food with them. But that is not the point. Please don't tell the Stone Soup story to explain this sign. This is a sign about where to find the bread of life and at what price.*

Verse 11. Notice the parallel with how John describes Jesus' actions at the last supper.

Verse 14. Have I already mentioned that what happens here is a sign? Did you see it? The folks there did. And they saw it as pointing to Jesus as "the prophet who is to come into the world."

Verse 15. However, the people mis-understand the implications of the sign they have seen. They want to make Jesus an earthly, political ruler - which is the false charge for which Jesus is later executed. And they want to do it by their own force - which is contrary to the power of God's love.

Jesus escapes and withdraws further into the wildness of the mountain.

But wait. Thanks to the creators of the Lectionary, there's more. Jesus walks on water too! (Sorry, I'm getting a bit giddy.)

The story of Jesus walking on the sea is another sign. It is a sign of Jesus' authority over the living spirit that is the sea. A living spirit that is dangerous and unpredictable.

That this story is a sign of a deeper, spiritual reality is emphasized by the comment that when the disciples in the boat see that it is Jesus and change from being afraid to wanting to take Jesus into the boat, they are all

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immediately transported to the shore. The spirit of the sea has nothing more to do with them once they want Jesus to be with them in their boat.

As always with miracle stories, the moral of the story is **NOT** in the literal event.

These stories try to open our eyes, hearts and minds to see the hidden truth that is plain sight. They are trying to train us so that we too can **SEE** where is the bread of life; so that we can **SEE** just how much authority we should give to dangerous, life-threatening, chaotic spirits.

So that we can **SEE** Jesus and welcome him into our frail boats on the stormy sea.

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\* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.