

John 6:1-21

Gospel of John, Part Ten: What Are We Afraid Of?

“What are we afraid of?” my sermon title asks. Is that a stupid question or what? We’re afraid of the Coronavirus. Otherwise and more ominously known as Covid 19. That mysterious, highly contagious illness that has now been categorized as a “pandemic.” To which some can remain asymptomatic for weeks, while others become sick enough to die. Is that what we’re afraid of? Dying?

What are we afraid of? The uncertainty itself is part of it, right? The not knowing. This has never happened before. The NCAA Basketball Tournament has never been canceled before. We’re in uncharted, rough waters. And a strong wind is blowing.

Surely it won’t come to Kansas—we’re about as remote and sparsely populated as you can get. Johnson County, okay. It’s our most populated county. Wichita, okay. Our largest city. But surely not Hillsboro.

But what if it does come to Hillsboro? Will Dale’s and the Dollar General run out of items far more essential to us than toilet paper? Antiseptic soap and hand cleaner? Bottled water? (At a Wichita Dillons on Thursday we saw a man whose shopping cart was absolutely full of bottled water.) Food? Will we run out of food? Is that what we’re afraid of? That there won’t be enough bread to feed everyone?

How about money? Because of all the uncertainty, the stock market is in a free fall. I don’t know about you, but all of Lois’ and my retirement savings are tied up in the stock market. How long will it take to recover? Will it ever recover? Questions like these can quickly become overwhelming.

Last week, my sermon number 9 on the Gospel of John was titled “A Tale of Two Healings.” I discovered afterwards that I misspoke. I said that only the first of those healings, the one of the royal official’s son, was considered one of Jesus’ “signs,” those miraculous actions which serve in John as signposts of Jesus’ divinity. Turns out they both are; it’s just that the second healing, of the invalid by the pool of Beth-Zatha, was not explicitly called and numbered as one of the seven. Turns out we have two more of the seven signs in today’s passage.

The story of Jesus’ feeding the 5000 appears in all four gospels. And the version we find in John is different enough from the three “synoptic” gospels as to suggest this writer was not merely copying. Clearly, during the time period before the gospels began to be written this story had been widely passed on from person to person. Hmm. Almost like a virus!

Let’s consider some of the details we find in John’s version. Verse 2: “a large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” We can sense the manic urgency. No, not just sense; we can feel it. There are so many sick people. And they all need healing.

Verse 3: “Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.” Why up on a mountain? Was he trying to get as far away from the crowd (or, the virus) as he possibly could? It would be easy to jump to that conclusion. Except in the Bible, mountains are often places where God appears. Epiphanies, is the fancy, seminary word for it. And when John tells us that Jesus sat down, it’s not because he was tired. In first century Palestine, rabbis sat before they taught. A position of calm, non-anxious thoughtfulness.

A calm rudely interrupted by verse 5. Jesus looks up, John says, and he “saw a large crowd coming to him.” Can you feel the anxiety return? And Jesus says to Philip, who may simply have been the unlucky disciple nearest him, and asks him “Where are we to buy bread

for these people to eat?” What made Jesus think it was his responsibility to feed these people? And what made him think he could just pass it off to disciples? John tells us, in the next verse. Jesus said this to test Philip. And Philip took the bait. “Jesus, six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” Do you hear it? Philip was afraid. And what was he afraid of? He was afraid they wouldn’t or didn’t have enough money, afraid their resources would run out. Afraid there wouldn’t be enough bread to go around. (And we know what that feels like, don’t we?)

But more than that. Philip was afraid of failure. Afraid he wouldn’t be able to do what he thought Jesus had just asked him to do. “Feed these people.” “Uh, Jesus, how? I don’t think . . . Do you see how many there are?”

Fear is like a virus. It is contagious. And it spreads. Another disciple, Andrew, who apparently wasn’t keeping the proper and safe “social distance,” overhears. And he says, “I did see a boy in the crowd who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” His way of exclaiming, “there’s no way! There isn’t going to be enough!”

How many of us have that fear? That there isn’t going to be enough? Enough food to feed all the people who have come to the funeral? Enough money to pay this month’s larger than normal electric bill or unexpected auto repairs? Enough resources to last through at least a two-week quarantine? “Because sure we are going to get Covid-19!”

It is at this point, when his disciples are on the verge of panic, that Jesus takes charge. John tells us he knew all along what he was going to do. He took those five loaves and two fish, and gave thanks, and John says “he distributed them” to the crowd. In the other three gospels, his disciples do it, or at least help. John’s Jesus doesn’t need help. John’s Jesus is something special. (Have you, and they, forgotten the wedding at Cana?) And you know what? John says they all had as much as they wanted. And there were twelve baskets left over. That classic biblical number of completeness.

I could talk about how the crowds, when they realized what Jesus had done, had flipped out, and wanted to make him their king. (John even says “they were about to come and take him by force to make him king.”) Can you imagine the chaos? I could invite you to try to imagine how afraid the disciples were now. It was getting crazy! Things were about to turn violent! What were twelve puny disciples against a crowd 5000 strong? And just like in the other gospels, that was probably just counting the men.

And I could point out how—what does Jesus do next?—he just calmly goes back up the mountain. But I’m anxious to get on to the next part of the story. I don’t want to keep you too long. You might take me by force and make me your ex-pastor! And then I wouldn’t have a job any more. Lois and I won’t be able to afford our new house mortgage. (We should never have bought that house!)

What happens next is at least as crazy, if not more so. The disciples, for SOME stupid reason, instead of going up the mountain with Jesus, go down to the Sea of Galilee, and get into a boat, and start to go across. Did I mention it was dark? Do you remember what darkness symbolizes in the Gospel of John? Like when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night? It symbolizes fear. Jesus was nowhere to be found. They had to get who knows where for who knows what reason. And, oh yeah, “the sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. [And] when they had rowed about three or four miles [do you realize how hard that must have been and how long that would have taken? I’ve been on a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. It’s no fish pond, no Marion County Lake. Think Marion Reservoir, times twenty. Or let’s just make it twelve, and you get the idea.] they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.” Ya think? They were having a hard day! John doesn’t specify what they were afraid of now. Presumably because he didn’t need to. Pick your fear.

And then verse 20 just blows my mind (and I invite it to blow yours also). Jesus says two things to them. First, he says “It is I.” *Ego eimi*, in Greek. Do you know what that really means? It means “I am.” Do you remember who it was in Exodus who told Moses and his

people “I am?” That’s right, Yahweh. In the midst of the wilderness. In the midst of a strong wind and rough seas. In the midst of the Coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic.

The second thing he says to them is “Do not be afraid” . . . and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.” How many of you have heard of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich? She lived in England during the 14th century. During the pandemic known as the “Black Death.” For much of her life she “lived in permanent seclusion.” She got so sick she almost died. (She did eventually die, of course. As will we all. Just not from the Black Death.) But during this time, she had an epiphany from God. (Remember that fancy, seminary word?) Because of which she wrote the first book ever written in English by a woman. In this book she describes what came to be known as the “XVI Revelations of Divine Love, Shewed to a Devout Servant of our Lord.” And amongst these revelations was a seventeen-word phrase, for which she is probably best known. Are you ready? “All will be will, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

“All will be will, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Do you believe that? Do you know that? I do. It’s true. I can’t explain how, exactly. But we can talk some more about it, in the chapel after the service, for those of you who want to stick around for a bit.

We sang today’s hymn of response last Sunday already. I didn’t know at the time how appropriate it would be for today. (“You call me out upon the waters”)

For our benediction I want to teach you one more song. It’s very short, and meant to be repeated. (“Be not afraid.”)