

Bible Study Guide: Week of 7-19-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 6:1-21

⁶After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

6After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.

This scene takes place against a very rich backdrop. Note, for instance, the reference to the “Sea of Tiberias.” Tiberius was the second Emperor of Rome and was the stepson of Augustus, the first Emperor. He was in power at the time Jesus fed the 5,000. Herod Antipas named a city on the Western bank of the sea after Tiberius and the city, region, and sea were renamed in his honor. It is ironic that these signs of Jesus occurred in an area named for a Roman Emperor, since Jesus himself refuses to become king in this passage and later testifies before Pilate that “my kingdom is not from this world.” (John 18:36)

Further, we hear that the festival of Passover was near. This festival setting will become increasingly important over the next 6 weeks in the lectionary as we move through this chapter of John. An argument will eventually break out between Jesus and “the Jews” about the bread from heaven—that is, the manna that their ancestors ate in the wilderness. Jesus redefines this miracle for them later, pointing out it is God, not Moses, who gives the true bread from heaven. Jesus himself claims to be that bread from heaven. The manna, of course, was a tangible reminder of the Exodus story which begins in earnest with the Passover.

And finally, Jesus sat down on a mountain, once again echoing Moses and other important biblical figures who taught and did miracles and encountered and enjoyed the presence of God on mountaintops.

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Jesus' statement to Philip is given "to test him"—that is, to discern his true faith or, perhaps, to sharpen his awareness of the miracle that is about to unfold before him. Philip and Andrew display two archetypal responses to the miraculous: hopeless pessimism (Philip) and foolish optimism (Andrew).

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Jesus' command to make the people sit and the description of the grass are reminiscent of Psalm 23—"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." The language in this section has Eucharistic overtones: "He took the bread and gave thanks, etc." Note that in John's gospel there is no account of the Last Supper as there is in the other three gospels. Rather, here Jesus is instituting a meal here for the crowds which prefigures the Communion meal. Jesus himself will make this connection later in the chapter when he says, "Truly I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life within you." (6:53)

Loaves of bread, as I noted above, have deep symbolism in Judaism. Fish, likewise, had importance as symbols in the early church. We even have vestiges of this today in the "Jesus fish" emblems we sometimes see on cars. The Greek word for fish is *ichthus* (ἰχθύς). In Greek that word forms an acrostic, spelling out the words: Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ (Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior). Here, Jesus takes these symbols of the faith and forms them into a meal for the masses. Notice also the 12 baskets of leftovers—a deeply symbolic number—not only a basket for each disciple, but also a basket, perhaps, to represent each of the 12 tribe of Israel. Jesus lends additional significance to this connection when he commanded them to gather up what was left "so that nothing may be lost." Elsewhere in John's gospel Jesus refers to those who were given to him from the world by the Father and that he has vowed that none should be lost. We get the sense that we are dealing not with "mere" bread and fish here, but with far more significant truths.

The crowd, evidently, picks up on this, also. They claim Jesus is "the prophet"—likely the prophet like Moses referred to in Deuteronomy 18:15. It is not a far leap between a prophet who will be "like Moses" and a king—that is, one who will rise up (as Moses did) and lead the people into freedom. Keep in mind at this time the Jewish people are under Roman rule (as evidenced by this event taking place by the Sea of Tiberias).

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Jesus greets the disciples on the sea with the Greek phrase *ego eimi*—here translated as "It is I," but it could also be translated as "I am." This is the same as the Greek translation of the holy name of God given to Moses at the burning bush prior to the Exodus story—"I am." Jesus is truly God's presence there with the disciples. John seems to be saying that the disciples reached the shore with unusual speed once Jesus came to them on the water. The disciples wanted to take Jesus into the boat, but it is instead Jesus who got them to their destination before they even had a chance to pull him aboard.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus "tests" Philip in verse 5 and 6?
2. What other miracles or stories involving bread and fish can you think of from Scripture? How might these stories give us a richer appreciation of what Jesus has done?
3. What other stories of great abundance can you think of from Scripture? How do you think those stories tie in with this one?