

The Bread and the Circus

2 Kings 2:42-44
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A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

So [Elisha] repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. (2 Kings 2:42-44, NRSV)

The story that I just read is actually the fourth miracle by the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 2. Let me give you a brief review of those other miracles.

In the first story, a widow faces ruin because she has no money.
Her creditors are threatening to take her sons as slaves as compensation,
and so she goes to Elisha and pleads with him to help her.
Elisha tells her to go to her neighbors,
ask to borrow as many containers that they'll give her,
and then begin filling them with her small jar of oil –
the only thing that she has left in her house.
So she does that, and, incredibly,
the oil inside her jar multiplies so it fills every container,
and that gives her a source of income to fend off her creditors.

An oil geyser bubbling in a small pot.
That's a proper miracle, wouldn't you say?

In the second story, Elisha prophesies that a woman
who was unable to conceive will give birth to a son.
And she did.
And if that wasn't enough, when the son dies,
Elisha miraculously brings him back to life.
An unexpected conception, a corpse resuscitation.
Clearly, those are proper miracles.

In the third story, the one right before our verses this morning,
a group of prophets are meeting with Elisha
when they sit down for their business lunch.
Elisha's servant Gehazi had prepared a stew,
but when the men began eating it,
they said it tasted so bad that they called it "death in a pot."
Death in a pot. Have any of you ever had that dish?

It might be best not to answer that question.

Turns out, the stew had been made

with some unidentified, poisonous herbs that made it inedible.

Until, that is, Elisha purified the pot.

From Death in a Pot to Uncle Gehazi's Old-Fashioned Mediterranean Stew.

Now that's what I call a proper miracle.

I mention all these *proper* miracles, because . . . ,

well let me just re-read the three short verses that we have before us this morning.

A man came from Baal-shalishah,

bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God:

twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

So [Elisha] repeated,

"Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord,

'They shall eat and have some left.'"

He set it before them, they ate, and had some left,

according to the word of the Lord.

I'm sorry, but, as miracles go, color me unimpressed.

I mean, it's great and all. It *was* a time of famine.

But I mean, the industry standard for an average loaf of bread is eighteen slices,
not including the heels.

(And there's no need to fact check me on that --

I found that fact on the world wide web).

So, if the man gave twenty loaves of freshly baked barley bread

and if the industry standard in that day was the same as in our day,

that would be three-hundred-sixty slices of bread -- and forty heels.

Three-hundred-sixty slices of bread would make a hundred-eighty sandwiches.

If twenty people would be okay with eating the heels, as I would be,

that would mean enough bread to make two sandwiches per person.

I mean, even if they are just bread sandwiches,

you still had the sack of grain to distribute.

So, again, of the four miracles in 2 Kings chapter 4, well . . .

"one of these things is not like the others,

one of these things doesn't belong."

(That's Sesame Street, in case you were wondering)

But you know, maybe that's exactly why we need this story,

especially now, after this roller coaster of a week.

Like bugs to light in the night,

we are searching for, drawn to, captivated by

what we believe to be the shiny, the spectacular, the momentous,
the big event that will mold the future in a significant way.

But the ironic thing about this

is that all of the miracle stories in our Bibles –
whether performed by Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, or the apostles,
all of them are meant to draw us not to the miracle itself – not to the spectacle --
but to the God who is present and active in our typical, normal, ordinary lives of daily existence.

It's like we get so impressed by the glittering lights of the Las Vegas strip
that we dismiss the ordinary sun slowly rising up over the horizon.
When it comes to miracles, we'll take the bread, but only if it comes with the circus.

Bread and circuses.

The ancient Romans knew a thing or two about how to manage a huge country.
“Bread and circuses” is a phrase that was used to describe the Roman Emperors’ political strategy.
Give people enough food and good entertainment, the thinking went,
and you could appease the masses who were otherwise poorly served by their leaders.

In the first two centuries of the common era,
there was a wide gap between the rich and the poor.
The empire was stretched to its limits fighting seemingly endless wars
and needing a military presence in faraway places.
Its economy increasingly depended on imported goods.
It depended on foreign labor to fill undesirable jobs and then exploited them for show.
Hungry people filled the capital.
So what did the emperors do?

They built large stadiums to host violent sports, the games of the gladiators.
They put on chariot races.
They displayed exotic animals.
They produced lavish theatrical productions.
The public’s support, they found out,
depended not on exceptional public service and effective public policy,
but on diversion, on subsistence.
Fill people’s stomachs with enough bread,
fill people’s minds with enough entertainment,
and they’ll stay at home instead of marching in the streets.

Bread and circuses.

Empty calories, meaningless drivel,
and they won’t even notice the sorry state of their union.

It’s been an exhausting week, for a number of reasons,
and I think we can all understand the outpouring of emotion, of relief,
when, finally, a winner of the presidential election was announced.
And it would be wrong of me, or anyone,

to temper the joy of those who felt like their lives
– not their livelihoods, but their lives, their bodies –
were campaign issues that hung in the balance.

And it's absolutely true that persons who are put in positions of great power
have the capacity to do either great harm or great help
to the noble ideals that our country puts before us.

And finally, no matter the politics, surely we all can understand what it means for so many people
that Kamala Harris will become the United States' first female,
first Black, and first South Asian vice-president.

That's truly something to celebrate.

And yet, God's love, God's mission does not wait on the outcome of elections.

In Christ, God has made us royals, a royal priesthood,

that we may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

And so, our faith compels us identify the circuses

that captivate and seduce us into thinking that the future

to which God has included us in Christ is dependent on them.

When asked, Jesus said that the greatest commandment

is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind soul, and strength,

and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Loving our neighbors means loving our Muslim and Jewish neighbors,

our lesbian, gay and transgender neighbors,

our undocumented neighbors,

our addicted neighbors,

our black neighbors,

our homeless neighbors,

our immigrant neighbors,

our sick neighbors

our lonely neighbors,

our incarcerated neighbors,

and our Republican and Democrat neighbors.

Loving our neighbors

may include a vote,

but it isn't love if it's only a vote.

The power to transform, to heal, to reconcile, to save, to free --

to love as God loves,

will not ultimately be found in a new administration

but in people who have been filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

A miracle to those who need food

And so maybe we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss

our three-verse story from 2 Kings chapter 4 as anything less than a miracle.

Think about it.

During a time of famine,

a man appears and brings to Elisha twenty freshly baked loaves of barley and a sack of grain.
There is no indication that this man was obligated to provide this food,
nor is there any indication that Elisha was in need of food.

No, this was the man's first fruits offering.
In the Israelite calendar, the feast of the first fruits marked the end of the harvest.
The offering of "first fruits" acknowledged
that the land and its produce belonged first of all to God, even during a time of famine.
This offering served as a reminder of God's providence,
and it guarded against selfishness and greed.

This, friends, is a miracle of daily existence.
It is made possible by God's providence.
It is initiated by the generosity of nameless giver.
It is shared with others because of the recipient's generosity.
It was distributed with equity.
And, through it all, the community shared in the holy.

In John, chapter 6, after Jesus fed the thousands,
the crowds wanted to take him and make him king by force.
Of course they did.
They wanted a political means to advance what they perceived to be God's cause in the world.

But Jesus, he would have nothing to do with that.
He withdrew to a mountain to be by himself and then took a walk across the lake.
The next day, when the crowds found him on the other side of the lake,
they said to him, "Rabbi, *when* did you get here?"

But Jesus knew the reason for their search.
Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you're looking for me not because you saw the signs I performed,
but because you ate the loaves and had your fill."

Do not work for food that spoils, Jesus said,
but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."
But the crowds, they wanted the miraculous, the bread from heaven,
the manna from the sky that their ancestors ate.

But Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never go hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:25-35)

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread",
let us remember that "us" and "our" puts us in solidarity with the hungry
but also with those who need God to teach them what it means to have enough.
You see, "Give us this day our daily bread" is a petition
that provides justice and hope when it is prayed by people who mean it.

Don't miss the ordinary miracle right before you,
with people taking what they have been given,
sharing what they have with those who need it, a
and praising God who includes them in this holy miracle.

Do you believe in miracles?, people sometimes ask.

I think the only reasonable answer is "no" --

"No, we do not believe in miracles.

We believe in God who, by the power of the Holy Spirit
is at work in normal, ordinary, typical human beings,
and is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. "