

The Faith Between the Scenes

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You know that part of the play between scenes when curtains close and the lights go dark and you can just make out the stage crew moving the set around, or see their feet running back and forth behind the curtain in that space where the curtain doesn't quite touch the floor?

I feel that is where our Gospel takes us today –to the scene changes only, without the high drama that occurs in between.

That's because these excerpts from the 6th chapter of Mark's gospel cut out about 20 verses that include some of our favorite stories about the power of Jesus. So we do not hear about how Jesus uses 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed 5000 hungry men and their families. Nor do we hear about Jesus walking out upon the waves of the Sea of Galilee later that night, getting into the boat with his terrified disciples, and calming the winds. Not this Sunday at least.

Instead, we have Jesus and his disciples on either side of these big events, exhausted and famished from the non-stop need of Israel for teaching and feeding and healing. When his disciples gather to tell him all they have done at the start of today's Gospel, it's because he had sent them out two by two several verses earlier "with no bread, no bag, nor money in their belts" to try their hand at preaching repentance, casting out unclean spirits and healing the sick. And Jesus knows what they need next – a vacation, a retreat to some deserted places where most folks don't go.

And so he sends them there. Only to have a voice in the wings shout, "There they are, we've found them" – enter the 5000 stage right.

I have this picture of Jesus and his followers huddled in the dark, scarfing down some bottled water and a humus plate, trying to get some sleep, hoping no one identifies them. And in the dimness you can just make out the gathering of a crowd, you can hear the sliding of mats across the stage floor, the carrying in of stretchers. So that when the lights go up, Jesus and his followers will wake up startled in the middle of an expectant crowd.

Then the scene jumps to our heroes pulling their boats up on the beach, after a terrifying night-time crossing of the Sea of Galilee, embarked upon once the

crowd had been fed and sent on their way. I can just see them staggering onto the beach and collapsing. And then that voice again, “Hey, is that who I think it is?”

It makes for strange theater, these moments with Jesus between the scenes. They probably far outnumbered the big spotlight events of the Gospels. Here we catch a glimpse of an exhausted messiah, if not a reluctant one. And we see the fragility of God’s servants, the weaknesses of the shepherds, their limits, their own need for food and healing and rest.

But we also see the need that drives the sheep right to them. And that is Israel’s need for God. It is the background noise of all the stories of the Scriptures, the feet moving behind the curtain. We think the star of the show is Jesus, but really it may just be the crowd. Because that is who God wants to save. And in these two little quotidian moments in the saga, we learn something about that crowd as well.

It is determined. It is fueled by hope. These people expect God to respond to their need because they have no recourse other than to get themselves to a place where they believe God will hear their cry. Israel [didn’t really have professional healers](#) the way they did in Egypt. That’s where you had to go if you wanted sutures, or splints or cauterizations. For the members of Israel, you went to the temple, or to a prophet, because healing was from God and the hope of future healing was with God.

So when the crowds gather, dragging mats and carrying stretchers with their sick friends and family members, they are bringing them to the place where they believe God will hear them. They are expressing the age-old faith of Israel in her God to bring restoration and repair. And that is precisely Jesus’ role in the Gospel of Mark. As a former pastor of mine, Fr. Joe Muth, used to say: “Jesus would melt in the presence of faith.” Find where Jesus is, that is the place where God will hear their cry.

And I think it’s this faith, the crowd’s expectation that God is in control when they are not, that prompts Jesus to end his break early, roust up his followers, and begin preaching, and teaching, feeding and healing all over again.

Because what Jesus says yes to -- God will not say no to. The crowd knows this.

I want us to stop for a minute and appreciate the faith of the crowd. It can look grasping at times. I can only imagine what it must have been like for Jesus to

wade through a crowd where everyone wanted to just grab the hem of his cloak. Imagine that. Just capture in your mind's eye the press of people, that much need. And that much determination that God will provide.

It might be hard for us to put ourselves in a group that desperate when we consider these crowd scenes. After all, in this day and age we could collectively generate and pay for treatment, vaccines, medicines for every sick person in the world. If we wanted to. The fact that as a species we don't, says more about our lack of mercy than about God's.

Still our little gathering here probably does not need to rely on Jesus alone for our healing, or our next meal, or our liberation from an oppressive regime. We have non-divine sources for those things, for the most part. Don't we?

But the story is not ultimately about extracting healing, or food or weather control from Jesus. It's about handing over control to God, voicing our constant need for God. It's about admitting that our solutions, as genius as they are, don't really fix most things. Despite all that we have, and expect, and succeed at, what does it mean to admit that in the end we are really powerless over the big picture?

Take a moment and call to mind the things that you do not have control over in your life right now. ... So I don't know what you've got, but I'm thinking about the general election, the violent and divided nature of our country, the frightening decisions of the Supreme Court. I'm feeling a lot like a sheep without a shepherd right now. And then there's also the choices my grown kids make, my 95-year-old mother's failing health, all the people on our prayer list.

What would it take to bring those things to the place where Jesus and his followers are? Where is the place where you are most confident that God will hear your cry?

Might this liturgy, this act of worship, also be the place where we drag our mats, drop our stretchers, and bring our pain before Jesus? Is this where we might come searching for a shepherd that won't disappoint or stumble or get the answer wrong?

What the crowd found time and again was a bedraggled and somewhat misfit crew of tired, hungry disciples following a leader who could not say no to faith. They probably wouldn't have lived up to Jeremiah's expectations of shepherds

either. In the next chapter of Mark, these healers and wonder workers will be admonished by Israel's leaders for not washing their hands properly.

Still, the crowd came to them anyway. Because the sheep know their shepherd as well as the shepherd knows them.

And I think some days that's the best we can do. Get ourselves to the place where we believe God will hear our cry, find our way to the spot where Jesus was last seen, drop our mat and wait for him to arrive.

Because our Gospel reminds us that it takes two for a divine healing to happen: the divine one who brings the healing, and the ones who wait, throwing their hearts open to receive it when it arrives. Amen.