



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

St. Luke's, East Hampton

August 3, 2026; Proper 13A: [Genesis 32:22-31](#); [Romans 9:1-5](#); [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Have you ever had a sleepless night? We have several babies here today. I remember just after my kids were born, when three hours of sleep felt like an amazing gift. There were times when the baby went down and I had to choose between a shower, some food, or a nap! I usually chose the nap and one time didn't shower for a week! I'm at a different stage of life. Now my kids are grown. I find myself waking up worrying about everything going on in the world, about issues of work or family, and things like that. Can you relate? Have you found yourself wide awake in the middle of the night, worrying about things done and left undone, struggling through the big questions of life, finding yourself angry with yourself and with God and at the same time wondering if God even exists? The whole story of the Odyssey is about this sort of thing. So is the story of Jacob, we heard about in our reading from Genesis a few minutes ago. Today we meet Jacob on his way to meet his brother Esau - who is approaching him with 400 men. Fearful of what is going to happen next, Jacob spends the night wrestling with decades of family dysfunction, feelings of guilt and hatred, questions of self-worth, identity and vocation. He tossed and turned so violently that his hip was put out of joint. When morning came, he knew he had wrestled with God, had been forgiven and blessed, and given a new name and a renewed sense of purpose. Sometimes, like Jacob, we need to go through a little bit of struggle in order to discover who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. It doesn't always require a new hip. Sometimes, a miracle works just fine.

This week's gospel gives us just that kind of miracle. The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle that shows up in all four gospels and is so important that Mark's gospel includes it twice! (It appears first as the feeding of 5000 in Mark 6:30-44 and then as the feeding of the 4000 in Mark 8:1-10.) Somehow the disciples hadn't planned quite right. Not only did more people show up than expected, they all showed up at dinner time! The offering of hospitality and giving of food to strangers was both a moral obligation and a

physical necessity. Jesus came through and saved the day by multiplying the little bits of bread and fish they had, making, in fact, more than they needed. Matthew's version of this story was highly symbolic. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience that would have immediately recognized that the 12 of the 12 baskets left over was a number of completeness that represented the 12 tribes, the whole nation of Israel, and by implication all of humanity. They would have understood the message that when things look their worst God will provide, and not just our physical needs but also all of the spiritual, communal and familial needs represented in a meal. Living in that time after the temple had been destroyed and the Jewish people had been scattered throughout the Roman world, Matthew's readers would have understood that this was not just a story about bread for the journey or manna in the wilderness, but a promise that the kingdom of God would be restored. Living in a time when the celebration of communion was a common practice, Matthew's readers would have also understood that Jesus' words "he took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them" were intentionally Eucharistic. As people who recited the Lord's Prayer, they would have known that this miracle would be repeated every time that bread is broken and that God's kingdom would be made real every time the community gathered and communion was shared. As members of the early church, they would have recognized that this miracle was missional - that they were being fed so they could feed others as well.

One of the critiques - and one of the insights - of the film version of the Odyssey is that it moves away from the gods and looks at Odysseus' story from a human point of view. Take a moment and do that with the feeding of the 5000. What do you think actually happened (or could have happened) on that day? Our text tells us that 5000 men - and probably an equal number of accompanying women and children - had gone to a deserted place. I like to hike and have been to many deserted places. I don't know about you, but I never go into the wilderness without a backpack with water, food, and a raincoat or sweater. Jesus' audience were people of the desert. They were used to traveling in barren rocky wilderness areas. Do you really think they would have gone to a deserted place without bringing any food or drink? The five loaves and two fish were probably Jesus and the disciples' personal supply. Jesus instructed them to share some of what they had reserved for themselves with others, which they - probably reluctantly - started to do. Imagine other people seeing the disciples putting things out of their bags and deciding to do the same thing. Now imagine those actions rippling through the crowd. Think of the sound of zippers and conversations opening as more and more people - 5000 men plus women and children - opened up their backpacks, took out the granola bars or bags of

chips they had saved for themselves and shared them with one another. As this happened, more and more food appeared – so much that there were 12 huge baskets of food left over when it was done. Seen this way, the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 was not a multiplication of bread and fish but of generosity. This miracle was the moving of 5000 people's hearts and minds from a theology of scarcity to abundance, from a presupposition of fear to an assumption of hope. The feeding of the 5000 was a rediscovery of the spiritual meaning of hospitality that taught people about God - and about what God was calling them to do and who God was calling them to be. The feeding of the 5000 tells us that we are fed, not just to take care of our own needs, but so that we can feed others as well. Our culture sees the world through a lens of fear, a presupposition of scarcity, a focus on self, and a fundamental distrust of others. Imagine how our response to immigrants, the children of Gaza or Sudan, the fires in Canada, or to hungry people right here would be different – imagine how our personal stewardship would be different -- if we started with a presupposition of abundance instead. Imagine what would happen if we met the needs around us with generosity and hope. In Baptismal preparation, I tell parents that I don't believe in Original Sin. I believe in Original Blessing, that, as we hear in Genesis 1:31 everything - and everyone - that God created is very good. My hope, my prayer, is that this is where those children we baptize today will start, that from their very first awareness, they will know that they - and those around them - are not just good but very good, that they and those around them are blessed and named by God, and that they are recipients of the amazing and overwhelming abundance of love. Imagine how our lives and our world might be different if we started each day, telling ourselves the same thing. Perhaps what is needed is not just a breaking of bread but a breaking open of hearts, a dislocating of hips, and discombobulating of our lives so that God can come in. After wrestling with God, Jacob was able to reconcile with his brother. After wrestling with God, Jacob was given a new name, and was able to become the father of the 12 tribes, indeed of all of us. Jacob named the place Peniel because in those struggles he discovered that God had been with him all along. He named the place Peniel because in his wrestling, he discovered that he was forgiven, accepted and blessed, discovered who he was and what God was calling him to do. May this place be Peniel for these three babies being baptized today. May it also be Peniel for you. May your struggles break open your heart and may the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 continue through you.