

Proper 12 B 2021

Ephesians 3:14-21

Psalm 145:10-19

John 6:1-21

Long ago,
In a far country,
A friend and I made a mistake.
We thought a train called “Rapido”
Would be the fast train.
So early one morning,
We hopped aboard,
Expecting to arrive in the big city at lunchtime.
We began to imagine a sumptuous repast,
Only to discover, as the hours wore on,
That the train,
While more rapid than an ox cart,
Or a grandmother walking with a toddler,
Was actually the very slowest train on the line.

It stopped at every tiny village,
But only for a moment –
Not long enough to hop off
And buy a sandwich,
Or a cup of tea,
Or a bite of chocolate.

After many hours,
As the morning wore on into afternoon,
Our hungry solitude was interrupted
When a mother and three daughters
Entered our compartment,
And settled into all the available space –
And closed the windows we had flung open.

After another hour or so,
We asked,
In halting words and gestures,
What time the train was expected to arrive.
About eight in the evening,
We learned.
A fourteen hour journey over all, give or take.

Having delivered this discouraging news,
The mother rustled among her many bags,

And found the one she was looking for,
And began to bring forth,
One after the other after the other,
Enormous sandwiches wrapped in wax paper,
Which she distributed to her daughters.
We tried to look out the window,
To close our eyes,
To read,
But we kept glancing over at those sandwiches.

At last
The mother looked at us,
Smiled,
And handed over a sandwich for us to share.
Potatoes fried in olive oil,
Between two pieces of bread.
I still remember the first delicious bite.

That moment taught me much,
About generosity, graciousness,
Hospitality.
If I had a different personal theology,
If I needed to find possible, rational explanations
For the miracles of Jesus,
Then I might tell a story like this to try to explain
How there could have been food for so many people.
But I'm not looking for a rational explanation
For what makes more sense,
And means more, as a miracle.

The sharing I experienced on the train has often been offered
As an explanation for what happened
Among five thousand people
Seated on the green grass.
But I don't believe that for a second.
My experience on the train tells me nothing about the miracle
Of the loaves and fishes,
Any more than my experience of crossing a stream
On rocks just under the water
Tells me about Jesus walking on the water.

It's possible for people to share food unexpectedly.
It's possible to walk through water
On a surface you can't see.
It's possible,
But it's not the gospel.

We live in a world where many things are possible
And some seem almost miraculous,
Leaving us,
In our better moments,
Filled with gratitude and wonder.

And we live in a world
where many things seem almost impossible,
leaving us, many of us,
struggling with hopelessness.

Our experience of global pandemic
Leaves us – many of us –
Lost in wonder at the development of a vaccine in record time.
And close to despair
When we see the gross inequity, and utter folly,
And selfishness it has revealed.

Climate catastrophe leaves us,
Many of us,
Wondering what kind of future awaits, if any.

The housing crisis
Which has come to our doorstep –
An irony for a community that has tried for years
To be part of the solution to homelessness –
Makes us wonder if any solution is possible.

But – and this is good news –
The gospel is not about the possible.

The possible is what we make with our own hands.
The possible is what we can envision
And sometimes accomplish.
The possible is our criterion for what we ought to try,
Our rational response to a challenge.

It's important, the possible.
We can't live without it.

It was entirely within the realm of the possible
That a woman would get on a slow train called Rapido
And share a sandwich with two young women –
Who ate up every crumb.
But it's not the gospel.

It was beyond the possible
That Jesus would take five loaves of humble bread,
Give thanks,
And offer it to a multitude,
Who ate all they wanted
And found that there was always more.

It was beyond the possible
That when the disciples were out on the water,
In the dark with the wind against them,
Far from the safety of the shore,
Jesus would come to them,
Walking on the water,
And bring them safely to the other side.

Like us,
The disciples live in a world of the possible
And the impossible.
When Jesus asks where to get bread for everyone,
Philip says it's impossible.
And Andrew says there is not nearly enough.

That's the world we live in.
A world where the reasonable response may be:
It's not possible.
There's not enough.
It can't be fixed.

In a world of pandemic,
Climate catastrophe,
Democracy in peril,
Grotesque inequity,
It is hard to imagine what is possible.
There are not enough good news stories of human kindness
Or innovation or creativity
To make a difference.
Despair is one rational response to the state of the world.

But beyond reason, there is hope.
Hope is stronger than despair,
And hope is the gift
Of the God who chooses to keep acting in the world
In ways we could never imagine.

In a world like ours,

The good news is this:
We are not limited by what we can ask or imagine.
The power of God reaches beyond the possible
To offer more than we could ever comprehend.
And yet, though we cannot understand it or control it,
We can experience that more,
And live within it.

The good news is not about the possible.
Miracles have no rational explanation.
Nor should they.
If they did –
If the multiplication of the loaves
Were really about sharing,
As the mother shared her sandwich on the train,
If the walking on the water
Were really about finding the rocky places
In a shallow lake,
Then where would we find our hope?
We have proven, beyond a doubt,
That we are not good enough,
Or strong enough,
Or loving or generous enough,
To carry that hope within ourselves.
It comes from the beyond,
As a gift.
The miracles are a sign of this gift.

Does this mean we wait passively
For a miracle to fix the mess we've made,
Or untangle the tragedies we can't help?
By no means!
It does mean, though,
That when our best efforts fail,
There is still hope
Coming to us across the water,
We know not how.

The good news is beyond us.
The miracles are utterly mysterious,
And yet as close as our hearts.
They are about simple things,
Food and safety and healing.
They show us what we most need to know.
There is enough;
We are not alone;

the broken can mend.

Everything, even these truths, looks different now,
In these times.
But the stories of Jesus,
Stories that we cannot explain,
But only invite to come and live in our hearts,
The stories of Jesus
Offer the same gifts in these new times.

Wherever we find ourselves hungry or in need,
Jesus takes what little we have,
Something that was not possibly enough,
And in his hands,
Lifted in gratitude and blessing,
It is more than enough.

Whenever we find ourselves battling the waves
In the gathering darkness,
Jesus comes to meet us.
And when Jesus is with us,
We have arrived where we were going.

Whatever our lack, or loss, or longing,
Jesus will come,
Reaching beyond the possible
To bring the mystery to us,
And invite us to live with him
In a world made new by hope.
We can't understand it,
Or control it,
Or often even see it.
But it is no less real for that.
The truth is bigger than the possible,
And better.
The truth is a feast for thousands
Made out of one small offering.
The truth is a journey through fear and darkness
To a safe haven that is not a place,
But a person and a presence.

These are just two stories
Of the power of Jesus –
His power to do abundantly, infinitely more
That we could ask or imagine.

There is a story for you, too,
And for us together,
And for the neighbors who gather outside our door.

It hardly seems possible
That there would be grounds for hope.

But remember,
That's the good news.
It doesn't need to be possible.
If Jesus is here,
It has already happened,
And though we don't live in it yet –
I know this is true –
We live in the fullness of the promise.