

July 28, 2024 Prpr 12 Greatest Hits

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

One way to tell if a musician, band, or singer has made it professionally and commercially is when they put out an album of their greatest hits. These albums are collections of songs that have gotten a lot of play time, made it to the top 5 in the Billboard charts, or are so well known that even people who don't follow them, can name a song by the musician, band or singer.

We could say today's Gospel is a collection of Jesus' Greatest Hits: those miracles that even folks who don't read the Bible or go to church regularly have probably heard of: the feeding of thousands, disappearing from crowds, and walking on water. Each of these miracles is worthy of a sermon or Bible study of its own. Some have even been the subject of books, or at least a chapter in a book. But today, the lectionary doesn't break them apart, so we can consider them separately. Today we are given all of them, perhaps as an invitation to consider what holds them together, or what they might reveal together.

Several Biblical scholars point out that when we step back and consider this section of John's Gospel, Jesus's Greatest Hits appear to overlap with the events of the Exodus story in the Old Testament. We read in the beginning of today's Gospel that it was around the time of the Passover, the festival that celebrates God rescuing God's people from slavery in Egypt. That journey of freedom began with a meal, after which the people, led by Moses, passed through the waters of the Red Sea on dry land. Today's Gospel also includes a meal and instead of an entire nation of people walking through a body of water on dry land, Jesus walked over the water. Scholars suggest this is the author of John's Gospel indicating Jesus' role as liberator, the Messiah who came to free us from sin and death like Moses liberated people from the oppression of slavery, and to lead us into new life of the resurrection.

I am not about to argue with Biblical scholars. What they say has a lot of truth and value. The scholars help me step back and look at these Greatest Hits through the lens of fulfilling God's promise of salvation, of God being with us through life not as a passive observer but as a meaningful, intentional presence. For example, like the shepherd described in Psalm 23, one of the Bible readings that is *so* familiar it certainly would be included in a greatest hits of the Bible collection.

Most of you probably remember Psalm 23 begins with the line, "the Lord is my shepherd" and describes the distinguishing characteristics of the Lord as shepherd, or leader, by what the Lord provides.

One of the things the Lord provides is leading those in his care to green pastures, symbolizing abundance and comfort. You may have noticed that before Jesus fed the thousands in our Gospel today, he had a conversation with Philip and Andrew. He asked them where a person could purchase enough food to feed all the people in the huge crowd that had followed him. That is a question about commerce. Philip did not mention places like Cosco, Trigs, Aldi's or Walmart. Neither did he suggest local markets. Instead of naming potential places to go shopping, Philip answered with the practical reality they didn't have the funds to even consider such a shopping trip. Andrew, on the other hand, answered the question with what he observed – there was a boy with a few loaves and fish, things so small and ordinary from one person who also appeared so small and young no one would consider they had anything meaningful or worthwhile to contribute. A boy and his lunch can't compare to the aisles packed with so much stuff like at Walmart.

Jesus responded to all this by recalling Psalm 23 and instructing the disciples to have the people sit down. Did you notice where he wanted them to sit? Where there was a lot of grass. "He makes me to lay down in green pastures." This indicates Jesus is up to something holy. We don't know how Jesus got a hold of the boy's bread and fish, but it is probable the boy willingly gave them to him. Like the widow who gave her last two coins, the boy gave all he had to Jesus. Then Jesus gave thanks and distributed the bread and fish, giving the story Eucharistic tones. And like in Psalm 23, spreads a table in the wilderness, which is another translation of the psalm, indicating providing abundance and comfort in unlikely places.

Whether folks recognized these events as familiar to the Exodus story or Psalm 23, they saw the signs pointing to Jesus as the prophet, or the Messiah, the new Moses, or their new king. We read the crowd wanted to *force* Jesus to be king, but he disappeared, retreating to the mountain by himself. It seems that instead of following Jesus into new life, they wanted to control him, put him in their box, and make him turn the world into what they wanted it to be.

Perhaps Jesus ran away because he was disappointed the people were not interpreting the signs the way he had hoped. Instead of recognizing the shepherd described in Psalm 23 or the invitation to follow him into new life, one of freedom, they saw an opportunity to bring back the glory days of their past when they were a powerful people and not under the oppressive thumb of Rome.

Apparently deciding not to wait for Jesus to return from the mountain, the disciples took off across the water, maybe taking those 12 baskets of leftovers with them. Which was fine, until a storm blew in and they struggled. Then Jesus returned, walking on the water, telling them not to be afraid, much like Psalm 23, "I shall fear no evil, for you are with me." We read the disciples wanted to bring Jesus into the boat with them, and we don't know if that happened, because all the Gospel says is that suddenly they had reached their destination. "He leads me beside still waters....and surely goodness and mercy shall follow me."

Perhaps these greatest hits are about the goodness and mercy of God, and recognizing the Lord through such goodness and mercy that are the love of God present here on earth. Love that comes not to rule over us or dominate us, but to shepherd us through life, to be present, even if it contradicts the desire to control that love by giving it prestige. Love that flows out abundantly to all people. Love that emanates not from the thousands eager to see signs or seeking entertainment, not from the disciples who couldn't imagine how to feed thousands or were terrified of rough waters. The love of God Jesus embodies was released through acts of goodness and mercy when the least likely person in all these events offered or gave all he had.

It is hard to understand that kind of love in a world where there are contingencies and requirements, where a return is expected on investments, and generosity for its own sake is considered suspicious. There must be strings somewhere. No one gives without getting something back. That's how consumerism works. But that is not how God's love works. Nor is it how Jesus lived.

The generosity and trust of a child combined with the Love of God in Jesus created a means for God's ridiculously abundant life to be held, tasted, shared, and released that new life into a storm without fear. Perhaps that is the real miracle in today's Gospel. Perhaps we already have everything we need to unleash resurrection life into our community, into the world. Life that isn't going to be controlled, contained, or defined by what we want. Life that cannot take us back to the past, but can guide us, to those green pastures and still waters, life that can revive our souls, and direct us to right pathways, to where God is calling us, that will be with us even when we are in the roughest waters, or shadow of death, comforting us, providing what we need even in adversity, offering an abundance that makes it feel as if our cup is running over.

When even those who believe they have nothing much or anything of consequence to contribute, and when everyone else gives up what they are holding onto, even you and me, even if we think it small or of no value, and we give it all to God, that is when miracles still happen, and new life of the resurrection is unleashed. Then, not only will the hungry be fed, but those who struggle will find they are not alone. Then we will realize we can respond to the challenges of life without fear, and can receive the gifts of others with the grace of Jesus, we will recognize God is with us, right here and now, guiding us with goodness and mercy, all our days. Those are the greatest hits that can make life feel like a miracle.