

“Good morning and welcome, one and all. It’s such a joy to be here with you, and I’m excited about what God is going to do with us,” Jesus might have said. He might have said anything, but Saint John doesn’t record an address to the great crowd that kept following him, or even say *that* Jesus addressed them. Which seems a bit odd, considering that elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks at great length.

Stranger still, John’s Gospel usually avoids duplicating stories from the others, which were written earlier. Early Christian scholars thought St. John wrote his Gospel to supplement the others, and John’s Gospel itself points out “there are also many other things that Jesus did” — St. John does duplicate the feeding miracle, and the miracle of Jesus walking on water, and also emphasizes his power as a healer. In four Gospels, the feeding story is told six times.

But a skeptic might ask, “So what? Even if those stories were true, what did they accomplish? Wouldn’t the crowd just get hungry again? Why should I care if a few people on a boat saw something in a storm, got scared, and then found themselves at their destination with their friend safe and sound? Those moments sound impressive, but what did they change?” Such a skeptic might, involuntarily, be helping us deepen our faith by pushing us in exactly the right direction, pushing us past the superficial level of the story and forcing us to think harder.

Something you learn in seminary, or at least you should, is that preserving writings was very difficult in ancient times, so every detail that the ancients chose to record was important, and stories that were repeated were absolutely critical.

The simplest answer to why the first Christians particularly treasured these stories is because they were instrumental in revealing who Jesus is. His teachings certainly were, and are, important, but nothing is more important than the Teacher. That’s why St. John calls Jesus’s miracles “signs.” Demonstrating power to conform natural forces and reality itself to his will were signs that Jesus is God. Using that power to feed, protect, and heal signified that God is gracious and loving, all the time, and without requiring that humanity first reach some standard of goodness. Using simple, concrete, relatable situations, Jesus’s signs also indicated his humanity. His signs, like his words, advance his mission of revealing who God is. They point to his identity, his unity with God. As does the way John tells the story.

For example, two chapters ago, Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” And now John tells us it’s Passover, a time when Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. But John shows us 5,000 people who have made a pilgrimage to be with Jesus instead. Jesus is not replacing Judaism; he is merely making the God of Israel more accessible, visible, relatable, vulnerable.

And just as God fed Israel manna in the wilderness, fed them all, unconditionally, so too does Jesus feed everyone who followed him, just because they followed him, not because they followed him for the right reasons. St. John tells us they “kept following

him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Jesus doesn’t ask if they are self-interested, or curiosity seekers, or skeptics, or enemies. He feeds them, signifying God’s unconditional love.

But then, having gotten a glimpse of God, the people instead chose to see what they wanted to see. “They were about to come and take him by force to make him king.” That is, declare him to be the sort of king they thought they wanted. And it would be easy to denounce the crowd, but I have some empathy for them. They lived under foreign oppression and domestic corruption. Meeting basic needs like food, water, clothing, and shelter required backbreaking, tedious, often dangerous labor. There was nothing we would call “health care” and little security against misfortune. Life was hard, and hope was scarce.

So someone with Jesus’s track record would inspire not only high expectations, but immense, diverse, unrealistic, and even contradictory expectations.

I have no idea what that could possibly be like.

Seriously though, while I am about as far from being Jesus as a bearded man who loves God can get, I think the proper response to such expectations is the same now as it was then. And I don’t mean running for the hills, though that is always an option. No, the best way I can respond to your expectations is to keep our focus on God, not on me. While I am very glad to be here, and I do look forward to getting to know all of you, ministry is bigger than community.

So we’re going to build up our ministries of worship, formation, and service, not because of what they will do for us — even though they will make our lives better — but because doing so will give God the glory he so richly deserves, draw us closer to God, and show the world who God is, just as Jesus did. I am no substitute for Jesus, but we who have dedicated ourselves to him are his body on earth.

Compared to the peasants of 2000 years ago, you have it good, but I know that you have been through a lot. God was with you in every moment of every struggle, every moment when you might have felt hungry or terrified or doubtful or tired. God might not have always felt close, and indeed, sometimes God is quiet, but he can feed us when he’s not speaking to us. And God got you through everything, got you safely through the storm to this glorious day. You stayed faithful, allowed God to feed you, keep you, heal you — and that is a sign that you are already a people of profound faith. There is no quality more important in a church, and I am impressed.

Dear friends in Christ, you have given me a great honor and a great blessing by calling me to be your new rector. I thank you from the bottom of my heart and I pray that I might prove worthy of this sacred trust and a blessing to you in return. I have always been confident that Christ will sustain us with the same grace, compassion, and boundless love that he has always revealed to the world. Now I am also confident that the community he has gathered in this place will respond with the same faithfulness you have shown through many trials.

But that was only the beginning. We are just getting started. God got us here not so we could pat ourselves on the back, declare victory, and call it a day, but because God has high expectations of us. Regardless of the age of any individual, Advent is a young church, and its very name indicates that we are not looking back to the glories of a patron saint, but forward to the decisive arrival of the Kingdom of God.

We should look ahead with faith that God is going to give us what we need to carry out his mission. If sometimes we can't see that or feel that, we can always pray as Saint Paul prayed. "I pray that we may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God." And it's going to be better than all right. "The power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

We tap into that power when we respond faithfully to God's generosity. Now, experts have said that you shouldn't tell a congregation what to do on your first Sunday. So here is what I'd like you to do. Stay faithful, and continue to grow in faith by choosing to put God ahead of all else. Make seeking, serving, and sharing Christ your first priority. Declare to yourself that he is your ruler and guide. Let the world react to what Christ is doing with us, rather than letting the world make us what it wants us to be, or letting the world tell us who Christ is or is not. Join me in proclaiming the joyful and glorious truth of Jesus Christ to the world.

"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." Amen.