

Go and Find Out
Psalm 23; Mark 6:30-44

Our friend Mary Barnard forwarded a link to a study that demonstrates the heart-healthy benefits of reading poetry, particularly when recited aloud! This is one of the reasons I appreciate Nancy Donny's reading of Psalm 23 from the King James Version; the rhythm of the measured cadences encourages the reader to slow down. The delivery, in part, conveys the message.

Mark's message is straightforward and challenging; Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." In this sermon, I wish to contextualize those words in Mark's Gospel, as well as with respect to Psalm 23, before turning to what they might mean for us today.

Earlier in chapter six, Mark described how Jesus had sent the disciples out in pairs. They had spread amazing grace in his name, including acts of healing. Then, the disciples had returned to Jesus, triumphant and exhausted.

So, Jesus promised them rest, and he led them by boat to a secluded area.

The crowds, however, followed on foot. The word about Jesus and his disciples had spread, and people were drawn to their magnetic ministry.

After observing the crowd, the disciples felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of people. Ready for a break, they urged Jesus to let the people go and buy their own food. I suspect that they were not only exhausted but also experiencing compassion fatigue. They were exhausted, both physically and spiritually.

And Jesus said, "You give them something to eat."

The disciples immediately protested: Can you blame them? Perhaps the world's needs overwhelm you too. Tomorrow, October 7, marks a year since the brutal Hamas attack on Israel, and the human crisis in Gaza remains profound, with approximately 41,000 deaths and over 90 percent of the population displaced from their homes. The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia remains unresolved. There is a famine in Sudan. The hurricane wreaked havoc in our state. We have seen pictures of devastation.

"You give them something to eat." Really? The suffering is so great. We feel compelled to continuously contribute. Our own needs, as well as the demands on our time and resources, have left us exhausted and overwhelmed, possibly depleted of compassion reserves.

If you can relate, I'd like to direct you to the second invitation that Jesus offered. He did not give the disciples a plan to systematically feed the thousands. He asked them, "How much bread do you have?" And when they did not answer, he added, "Go and find out."

I'd like us to hear "go and find out" as a gentle invitation from our *Savoir*—words that have the power to inspire the weary and give hope to the despairing. Like the Old Testament story of Manna, Jesus might have rained bread from heaven. Instead, his ministry requires human participation: "Go and find out."

You can do this; listen to Jesus. I wonder if the real question is not whether you believe in miracles but rather whether you believe in yourself.

Eddie Glaude Jr. is one of our finest public philosophers, and he says, “We are the leaders we have been looking for.” Democracy has always been a precarious endeavor, delicately balancing between chaos and tyranny. It’s why Churchill called democracy the most problematic of all systems of governments—except for all the other ones.

But the answers to the problems in our country lie not with a prophet or hero but with the willingness of everyday people to work for democracy, truth, and justice. People of character and integrity who do what they can right where they are. People with the courage to “go and find out” might help.

Jesus empowers us to be the disciples we have been looking for. To prove this point, Mark skillfully weaves this story with the famous Psalm 23 poem. I’ll point out the parallels as a means to reassure us that, especially when we are tired, God is with us as comfort and strength.

Psalm 23 begins, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion upon them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. Like the psalm, he leads them beside the still waters and makes them lie down in the green grass—note that Mark specifically refers to the green grass! Then, like the psalm, Jesus prepares a banquet for them. This is no snack. Everyone eats their fill.

Once Mark establishes the connection with Psalm 23, he evokes the entire psalm and its meaning. In the Middle East, shepherds led their flocks from behind so that they could look out for danger. Even as they “walked through the valley of the shadow of death,” the sheep had to trust. Sheep had to have faith that, again quoting Psalm 23, “goodness and mercy followed” them. This is how we can “go and find out.”

I found resonance between the faith at the heart of Psalm 23 and a poem by my friend, Jasmin Pittman, who lives outside of Asheville. With her permission, here is part of her poem “Transitions.”

After the floods,
I barely recognize
this place,
blanketed in mud,
but still feel
her pulse,
the way a baby
curled in darkness
lives by the steady

drum of a mother's heart.

God is with us like a shepherd, like a mother. Jasmin ends the poem, "[There is] a long labor on the horizon." It will take years to rebuild in western North Carolina.

But the poems and scripture that inspire me, as well as the people I love most, teach me that faith does not look away from the world but toward it. When Jesus says, "Go and find out," we find the strength to move forward and the assurance that God uses our labor to multiply our gifts, even after our death.

Ginny and I appreciate your heartfelt prayers on behalf of our family and friends after the recent death of Phil Mickey, who was like a second father to her. Yesterday was the funeral, and there were many wonderful stories shared in memory of Phil, who was an engineer by profession and a servant at heart. His young grandchildren submitted their individual remembrances, which the pastor read from the pulpit in loving tribute. They all loved Papa.

The first-grader wrote how he enjoyed fetching the mail with Papa, and I was zinged with the memory of when mail was magic. Do you remember when mail was miraculous? I kept a watch out the front door for the enchanted truck that crept down our street. The mail carrier smiled and waved as he departed. Remember how pulling letters from a rectangular box made you feel all grown up? For a first-grader, there is no junk mail. And Phil, peace upon him, knew this. He crafted a lasting memory from a task easily taken for granted.

Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." There are many ways to give, and among the most life-giving are the ways you make someone feel special, especially when it seems like you aren't doing anything at all. You might think you are just walking together to collect the bills and grocery store coupons, but you give that person something to hold onto—maybe something like hope, something that they then pay forward. And God multiplies the gifts.

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