

Deuteronomy 11:1-12
Matthew 14:13-21

Second Sunday of Christmas
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 2, 2022

Hills and Valleys

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we hear Moses warning the people of the dangers ahead in the wilderness, on the way to the promised land. They need to take care to keep the Lord's teachings. Then they can rest assured that God will care for them, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 11:1-12...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

There are relatively few stories that are recorded in all four gospels. But the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is one of them. And it is the only miracle story recorded in all four. Jesus had just received news of the death of John the Baptist. And so we assume that it is for this reason that he withdraws to a lonely place. Jesus found time in his busy schedule to be alone with the heavenly Father, as prayer nurtures a vital relationship and enables us to meet life's challenges and struggles. Even so, the crowds find him. And when they are hungry, he feeds them. Listen to these words from Matthew 14:13-21...

Sermon

As we have gathered here on this first Sunday of a new year, we come into the presence of a loving God—One who will not slumber in his care for us. That's the message that I want to bring—that God will provide for us. As our Old Testament Lesson assured the people of Israel who were entering a new land, it can also assure us of God's care. And as our Gospel Lesson demonstrated Christ's compassion and provision for hungry people, we too can trust in that provision today.

As the children of Israel journey toward the Promised Land, they are given various instructions by Moses. One of the things they are told is that the land they are headed to is nothing like the land they left behind (v. 10). They hear that it is a different land. It is a land that will require them to think in a new way. It is a land that will require them to depend upon the Lord and upon him alone.

As we read these verses, we can see a parallel between the words of Moses concerning Canaan and this new year that we have just entered into. Like the Israelites, we are beginning a journey into the unknown, a new land. Success may require that we do some things differently than we have in the past. And it is important that we live day by day in dependence upon the Lord, and seek to honor his commandments.

The Promised Land is described as a land of hills and valleys. As such, it is nothing like the land of Egypt from which the people have come. Egypt is a flat land, with no mountains and valleys. Canaan is different. When the Israelites entered Canaan, they would encounter hills and valleys.

No doubt the new year will be for us a year of hills and valleys. There will be times when we feel good about our lives and other times we will walk through dark valleys. As we enter this new year, let us do so with the knowledge that it will bring with it both joyful experiences and painful times as well. But let us remember that in all our times, God's intentions for us are not evil but good, as we read in Jeremiah,

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jer. 29:11)

Moses wants the Israelites to know that agriculture in Canaan will be different. In Egypt there was little rain, and its agriculture depended on water from the Nile River. And there was work in getting the water to the fields to grow crops. In Canaan, God himself would

see to sending the water they needed. They would not have to dig canals and build complicated irrigation systems to make the land fertile. They would simply have to depend on the Lord to take care of them. He would let the rains of heaven fall upon them. It would run off the hills and water the valleys and as a result their land would flourish. There would be milk and honey. God's promise to them is that if they would walk in obedience to him, he would see that their need for was met. This new land is a land that God cares about. The land they are headed to is a land that commands the attention of the Lord. He is committed to watching over their land and over them as well.

But let us not neglect the cautionary note in our lesson. The people of are reminded that the only thing that can prevent them from enjoying the fruits of the Promised Land is themselves. And the only thing that can hinder us this year, as a church family, and as individuals, is ourselves. If we walk with the Lord in faith and obedience, we will recognize his loving care for us. So let's enter into this new year with trust. Let's go into it with the deep and settled confidence that God will be with us, and for us. That God will care for us each and every day. Be it on a mountain top, or in a deep and dark valley.

A good example of God's care for people is found in our Gospel Lesson. Matthew says that Jesus had compassion on the people and healed their sick. When we are suffering or carrying heavy burdens, when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we can be assured that our Lord has compassion on us and will offer us his peace and wholeness.

As evening approached, the disciples recognized that the people would be getting hungry. This was a remote, deserted place; so they would need to go into the villages and buy some food. But Jesus had another idea. He said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." However, the disciples protest, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Five loaves and two fish betoken our human helplessness. Our little. If there had been just six or seven people when it came time to eat, then a disciple might have thought there was something he could do, but a crowd of thousands of hungry people? Thus the despair over the little they have to offer to the seemingly impossible task. Just five loaves and two fish. To which Jesus replies, “Bring them here to me.” (v. 18)

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. (vv. 19-20)

The seemingly little we can do, even though it be but a word of cheer, a prayer, a sermon, an anthem, a phone call, a hand on the shoulder, a note, a meal provided, even though it may seem like a drop in the ocean against the vast need—by Christ’s blessing it proves to be of great value. When we bring what we have to Jesus, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

Yes, Jesus cared for those people, and he was unwilling to let them go away hungry. He took the small gift of an unnamed boy, and turned it into a gracious plenty. He took the skepticism of his own followers—“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish”—and he proved again that when human comfort and provision fail, God’s comfort can touch and provide.

My friends, as we come today to say good-bye to an old year, we can say hello to a new year, trusting that God cares for us and will provide even beyond what we ourselves have the ability to provide. We can take our joy and our sorrow. Our peace and our confusion. We can take our hopes and fears to God, and God will provide. We can take to him our labors and our heavy burdens and find rest unto our souls.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.