

Bread, Fish, and a Bomb

Isaiah 55:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21 Loaves and fishes

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
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I.

The news has just come out: Herod has executed John the Baptist and served up his head on a platter as a party prize. Jesus has taken off. Someone saw him heading for a boat out on the lake. You had been captivated by John the Baptist's message of repentance and the coming of God's kin-dom. You had gone out to see him at the River Jordan, had been baptized for forgiveness of your sins in that shallow, muddy river, and emerged feeling clean in spirit. You felt ready to work for what is right and true and good, even in the face of the current murky regime and brutal oppression. You weren't quite sure how to begin.

Then Jesus came along, also a follower of John, but forming his own message. You began to listen to him, too. Lately he's been talking about the power of a single little mustard seed to grow into this bush big enough to shelter the birds. Or the power of one little pinch of yeast to raise many loaves of bread. Jesus says God's kin-dom is like that. You're not sure yet what that looks like in your life, but it's intriguing.

When you get the news that John is dead and that Jesus has left town, you feel lost, like you can't breathe. Sure, John had sidestepped the political power of the Temple by baptizing out in the wilderness. He was preaching a radical truth, and the people in power didn't like it. It was only a matter of time before he got some kind of comeuppance. Even so, this comes as a shock, a blunt reminder of how brutal the regime can be to those who dare to speak truth to it.

You don't know what to do. So you leave town, too. Not Jerusalem; you're north of there, on the Sea of Galilee. You join a trickle of others, and then dozens, and then hundreds, and then countless numbers of people walking out from the towns to find Jesus.

What do you hope to find? In this moment of feeling lost, you hunger for comfort, community, counsel. You don't know what you hope to find. The very act of following this prophet and teacher might have consequences for you. All you know is, you have to go. You have to be with this truth-teller, this preacher of God's kin-dom, this teacher of another way.

As you mount the dusty path to a small bluff, someone ahead of you shouts and points out onto the lake. There is Jesus, alone in a small boat, one person on that great lake. Is he weeping? Is he praying? You can't tell from this distance. After a moment you see him turn and look toward shore. He puts his hand up to shield his eyes from the afternoon sun. And then he seems to decide something, because he takes up the oars and rows back to land.

II.

The bomb fell at 8:15 on a Monday morning, August 6, 1945. Seventy-two years ago today. Tokyo had already been bombed plenty, and thousands had died there in firestorms. So Hiroshima had created fire breaks, just in case. But this was a different kind of bomb entirely.

What were people doing on that morning in Hiroshima? Children must have been eating breakfast, perhaps a bowl of rice. Workers must have been on their way to their jobs, or perhaps just getting started on their tasks for the day. Perhaps the humidity was already oppressive, or maybe there was a bit of a breeze.

And then, in an instant, everything changed forever.

A single plane flew overhead, very high up. Did the bomb whistle as it fell? Were there air raid sirens? Was there any warning at all? Did people crouch under tables and hope for the best? Or did it simply wipe out this city in a second?

At least 60,000 people died immediately. By the end of the year, an estimated 140,000 were dead, including those who died of injuries and radiation poisoning.

One little bomb; so much devastation.

Some suggest that ultimately the bombs on Hiroshima and, three days later, on Nagasaki saved lives by ending the war so definitively. My Uncle Bud was headed to Japan with his military unit. Would he have survived a prolonged war and come home, as he did, to marry, have kids and grandchildren and now great-grandchildren, including a little girl who is half Japanese? Would any of those people exist if that bomb had not been dropped? It is impossible to know. I do not say that these lives are worth more than all the lives lost in Japan in those terrible days. The decision was made to drop those bombs, and we live in the world that comes as a result.

In the months and years after the bomb, the U.S. occupiers in Japan censored news about the extent of the damage and suffering it caused. At the same time, the Americans in Japan fostered a belief in freedom of the press, even as they practiced the opposite.

Hiroshima has rebuilt. It has a Peace Memorial Museum and Park. It is dedicated to the path of peace. The inscription on the arch at the peace park reads, "Let all the souls here rest in peace; For we shall not repeat the evil."

In these days, we hear lots of sabre rattling from North Korea. Iran, too, seems to be dancing around its recent nuclear weapons deal. Conflicts are heating up, and our own administration is not known for calm,

rational consideration before taking action. As our nation bakes in this hotter-than-ever summer, as our planet bakes with droughts and famines in Africa, as our forests burn and haze covers the West, as political tensions rise all over, as 65 million people leave their homes and become refugees, we may wonder how we can dedicate ourselves to the path of peace. How can we follow the lead of Hiroshima and wage peace?

III.

The Gospel of Matthew says that when Jesus came ashore, “he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick” (14:14). When the hour grew late, he sat the people down. Somehow, he blessed and broke five loaves of bread and two fish, and everyone ate. Five thousand men, “besides women and children,” so in other words, more people than anyone could count.

One mustard seed becomes a great bush, giving shelter to the birds.

One pinch of yeast leavens all the loaves of bread.

A few loaves and fish feed thousands.

As we heard in the anthem this morning, one American soldier returns a flag to one Japanese soldier and offers friendship.

This is the kin-dom of God. You make small choices for the benefit of the greater good, and miracles happen on a large scale. People are fed in their bodies and in their souls, whether they have money to pay or not. They come together in community and support each other. They build bridges, not walls. They light candles to remember, so they do not repeat their mistakes.

Or. One bomb wipes out a whole city. Thousands upon thousands die.

Countries build walls, shut each other out. They arm themselves with nuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles. They create a military industrial complex and make big money off of going to war. That’s the alternative. That is the kingdom of humans. Greed, fear, corruption, hate, war. Corporations and the military industrial complex hold power. People are pushed to the margins. The language of love and peace and justice is not spoken there.

Which kingdom do you choose?

IV.

Jesus rows ashore to speak to the waiting crowd. It is 2017, and people are hungry. He says this:

We humans have been very clever, inventing ever more powerful ways to kill each other. But the really radical plan is to learn to love each other instead. This is the way to God's realm, God's kin-dom. And each one of you can do it. A little act, like a mustard seed, like yeast in dough, can go a long way. A word of welcome to a Muslim arriving at the airport. A sign in the window saying we stand for love. A rally to say that Black lives matter. Planting trees, starting a community garden. Feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless. Praying with our Native American brothers and sisters at the site of a proposed pipeline or coal export terminal. There are so many ways to be a mustard seed or a pinch of yeast.

People are hungry in body and soul. They are hungry for love, welcome, acceptance. They are hungry to learn, to get a decent education, to earn a living wage. They are hungry for food that is free of pesticides and poisons. People are hungry for a planet that is healthy. They are hungry for justice.

If we are to feed the thousands, it starts with a willingness to show up for each other, to share what we have, to speak the truth in a society that buys into lies. This is not easy, and it is not without risk. The Herods of the world can serve up one's head on a platter. We have to know this and make our choice. But the radical good news is that no matter what happens to our bodies, our souls are fed when we stand for justice, which Cornel West says is what love looks like in public. Justice is what love looks like in public.

We have to resist the powers that be, because they are about bombs, not bread. Chris Hedges says, “Resistance will entail a personal commitment to refuse to cooperate in large and small ways with the machinery of corporate power, especially the fossil fuel industry.... This will require us . . . to show up. And resistance will begin locally as we transform our neighborhoods and our communities.” (Chris Hedges on Alternative Radio, “Stopping Fascism,” Aladdin Theater, Portland, OR, May 26, 2017.)

Our leaders will not be the ones to save the world or to bring about the kin-dom of God. If we are waiting for our leaders, we will only be disappointed. It is not in their interest to stop being the one percent. When we come out of the cities and towns and gather here in the wilderness, when we feed each other in this place, we prove to ourselves and to them that another way is possible. Rome thought of itself as the breadbasket for the world, but it fed people by taxing the daylight out of the farmers. We get cheap food today on the backs of undocumented workers who are paid slave wages on our nation’s farms. The prophet Isaiah described God’s realm by saying, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

The kin-dom of God is not about who has money. It is about justice and peace, enough for all, an abundance of God’s love. Perhaps you think you are just one person and can do nothing. One person can change the world. And the world is hungry for such change.

Chris Hedges says, “We have a power that terrifies the corporate state. Any act of rebellion, no matter how few people show up or how heavily it is censored, chips away at corporate power. Any act of rebellion keeps alive the embers for larger movements to follow. It passes on another narrative. And it will, as the state consumes itself, attract wider and wider numbers.” (Ibid.)

Think of the mustard seed, or a few loaves and fishes. God's truth will out, censorship or no. God's love will feed us in abundance.

This is not to be kept a secret. The only way to feed more hungry people is to invite them to the banquet. So even as we come today to be filled in body and soul, let us also in turn feed this hungry world. God says there is plenty to go around.

Light a candle today in remembrance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the horrible price they paid for peace. And let us dedicate ourselves anew to wage peace forever. Amen.