The 7 Signs of Jesus | Feeding The 5,000

John 6:1-15

One of my "guilty pleasures" is Food Network cooking competition shows—*Beat Bobby Flay*, *Alex vs. America* and, of course, the classic, *Chopped*. If you've never seen *Chopped*, chefs are given four basket-ingredients—like *goat brain, crickets, cheese puffs* and *birthday cake*—and have to turn these unrelated, often strange, ingredients into a delicious, cohesive dish. Today, as we turn to John 6, in our continued look at the 7 Signs of Jesus, it's a bit like opening a *Chopped* basket, seeing the odd mix of ingredients and trying to guess what dish John is making for us.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle *(aside from the resurrection)* found in all four gospels. It's the same event told from four different perspectives, each with a unique message:

In *Matthew*, this story interrupts a larger narrative about John the Baptist's beheading by King Herod. As Jesus seeks privacy to mourn his cousin's death, the crowds just keep coming. Setting aside his own grief, he serves them. It's a portrait of Jesus' limitless selfless compassion.

Mark's version revolves around the disciples, who'd just returned from an exhausting ministry assignment. They'd given everything they had and were *beyond* spent, but Jesus tells them to now feed a starving crowd with no food. In the end, Jesus reveals that, while the needs are never-ending, the resources of God are more than enough to equip us for the work.

Luke emphasizes how participation in God's kingdom means prioritizing the poor and overlooked, the helpless and harassed, blending radical hospitality with practical generosity.

But as *John* presents this miracle as one of Jesus' seven *signs*, he includes several details not found in any of the other versions. Today, these details are our basket ingredients. And as we watch John assemble them, we'll discover the real secret ingredient of this miracle meal.

As always, John sets the table for this sign-story with meticulous attention to detail. He describes Jesus, having crossed the sea, now being followed by thousands of Israelites into the wilderness where he ***"went up on a mountainside"*** (Jn 6:3) adding, ***"The Jewish Passover Festival was near."*** (Jn 6:4) Passover, an annual feast, celebrates God's rescue of Israel as Moses led the people out of Egypt, across the sea, into the wilderness and up the mountain of God. John is presenting *Jesus* as a new *Moses*, which makes sense of the *bread* miracle. In Exodus, as the newly-freed Israelites enjoy their first taste of freedom, they quickly realize they have a new problem—there's *no food* and they're *hungry*. But God hadn't delivered them from slavery in Egypt only to let them die of starvation in the desert. The God who'd miraculously *freed* them was now going to miraculously *feed* them. They called it *manna*, and it appeared every morning like dew. It was an *all-you-can-eat buffet* with *no take-out boxes*. Leftovers—*strictly forbidden*—spoiled instantly. God was re-training the people to live by faith, trusting God for *daily bread*.

As Jesus provides this miracle-bread, the crowd sees it as not just a much-needed meal; they recognize it as a sign that Jesus was a new Moses, here to lead a new Exodus. John writes,

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say,
"Surely this is <u>the Prophet</u> who is to come into the world." (John 6:14)

Back in Deuteronomy, as Moses was nearing the end of his life, God said to him,

"I will raise up for them <u>a prophet</u> from among their countrymen <u>like you</u>, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them everything that I command him." (Deut 18:18)

God was promising a *future* prophet—*a Moses 2.0*—who would bring God's *vision* to the people in God's own *voice*. But as *Deuteronomy* and the Torah draws to a close, it ends by saying, ***"Since that time, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses."*** (Deuteronomy 34:10) *The prophet never came.* This cliffhanger dangling at the end of the Torah left the people wondering when and how this *prophet* (who they called, *The Messiah*) might come. As Jesus now fed them

miracle-bread, just as Moses had done so many generations ago, the crowd begins to suspect *the* prophet has finally come—the fulfilment of an ancient promise and their collective hopes.

This is our first basket ingredient—a *sign* pointing to Jesus as the God's true *prophet*.

As hope raced through the crowd, Jesus realizes, ***"they intended to come and make him king by force"*** (Jn 6:15). They'd been desperate for a king like Jesus to come along to liberate them from *Roman occupation*, just as Moses had liberated their ancestors from slavery in *Egypt*. This ever-present angst is evident from verse one of this story. As John presents Jesus as a new Moses, symbolically crossing the Sea of *Galilee*, he adds parenthetically, ***"That is, the Sea of Tiberias"*** (Jn 6:1) This isn't just a random geography lesson about a body of water that has two names. Actually, it had *four* names, but *Lake Tiberias—the name John barely whispers*—was its *newest* name. A decade earlier, King Herod—*not a real king, but an unstable wannabe dictator, a gangster with a God-complex*—renamed the lake in honour of the Emperor, *Tiberias Caesar*. *(Can you imagine how that felt—an unstable, gangster with a God-complex, a wannabe dictator provoking a supposedly inferior nation by renaming their lake after his empire.)* This was about intimidation, *subjugation*. Under Tiberias, Roman-Jewish tensions escalated. In Judea, Tiberias' appointee—*Pontius Pilate*—harassed the people with cultural insensitivity, crushing taxes, and cruel punishment, like public executions—*crucifixion*, a deterrent to would-be insurrectionists. And yet, insurrection was in the air, incited by every new sign welcoming you to Lake Tiberias.

This should colour how we read John's report about the ***"five thousand men."*** (Jn 6:10) Experts estimate that, with women, children, and seniors, the crowd may've exceeded 20,000. But John cites only the *men*. You might assume this is just everyday ordinary Biblical sexism—only counting the *men* because only the men *count*. And while gender equality certainly had a long way to go in the first century, counting only the *men* wasn't just patriarchy run amok; it was

a way of measuring military capacity; determining the number of able-bodied fighting-aged *soldiers*. In fact, in *Mark's* version, they're explicitly seated in *ranks* of *fifty* and *hundreds*. They aren't just being organized; they're *organizing*—assembling an army in the wilderness, well-fed, but with a growing hunger for justice. The people wanted to throw off the shackles of Roman oppression, to get their land (and their *lakes*) back, to see Israel returned to its former glory. But they needed a leader, and now they had one. Jesus would be their *king*, by force, if necessary.

These are our first two basket-ingredients: Jesus, the promised *prophet* and Jesus, the potential *king*. Which brings us to the *third* basket-ingredient: *the boy with the basket lunch.*

Of all the unique details in John's version, the boy with the basket lunch and the intimate portrait of Jesus with his disciples is by far the most specific *basket ingredient*. Some scholars wonder if John has insider info because the unnamed boy in the story is, in fact, *John himself*. The Greek word for *boy* in verse 9 was used for boys well into their late teens. John, believed to have been only a teenager when he became Jesus' disciple, regularly appears unnamed in the stories he tells. While we can't be certain, John sure seems to know every little detail, including the fact that the bread brought by the young man to Jesus to be multiplied was made of *barley*.

The specific mention of barley loaves links this feeding miracle to another miracle story in the Book of *Kings*. Because it's a short story, let's just read it and see if anything stands out.

A man brought Elisha twenty loaves of *barley bread* baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. *"Give it to the people to eat,"* Elisha said. *"How can I set this before a hundred men?"* his servant asked. But Elisha answered, *"Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'"* Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord. (2 Kings 4:42–44)

Jesus' miracle-feeding is almost a shot-for-shot reenactment of Elisha's miracle, from the *barley loaves* to the *skeptical apprentice* (like Philip, who said ***"It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"***) to the surprising *surplus*.

But here's what else both stories have in common. As the story in *Kings* explains, barley was the first grain to ripen in springtime—the *only* grain harvested in time for *Passover*. And on the Sunday morning of Passover, barley loaves were brought to temple and offered by the priest as the firstfruits of a new year's harvest. It was called a *wave* offering because priests *waved* the barley loaves before God, to be blessed and authorized for eating. Before this ceremony, barley was off limits. In *both* stories, the barley loaves should've have been brought to the priest. But this wasn't just a case of breaking a religious rule because the crowd was *hangry*; it was protest, the denouncing of a corrupt priesthood. And in John, it was a sign that the people had begun to see Jesus as their true *priest*. For Jesus (who knew all this) to willingly *receive* the wave offering, distribute it to be *eaten*, and miraculously produce ***"twelve baskets"*** of leftovers—*symbolic of all 12 tribes of Israel*—was *scandalous*. Jesus was declaring himself to be Israel's true *priest*.

John offers these 3 basket ingredients as *signs* pointing to Jesus as God's true *prophet*, *priest*, and *king*—the 3 offices of ancient Israel's leadership structure. John is revealing Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of all three roles in one—the *Messiah* and *true* leader of God's people.

*As a time-out…*I get that, while this might be interesting to *some*, for *most*, Jesus being a prophet, priest, and king doesn't feel overly relevant to our life. We take spiritual direction from *celebrities* and *social media influencers*, not *prophets*. Seek inner peace from *dispensaries* and *therapists,* not *priests*. Our world is ruled by *tech billionaires* and *politicians*, not *kings*.

But I wonder, how many of us could use a *prophet*—not just *a* prophet but *the* Prophet. How many of us need a word from God today, to hear God's vision for your life in God's own voice, know what God is thinking. Jesus isn't just another prophet speaking *on behalf of* God; as John says in his intro to the gospel, Jesus is *God's Word become flesh to dwell with us.* The Word of God revealed in human form. Everything God has to say about you, embodied in a person.

I wonder, how many of us could use a *king*. Not *a* wannabe dictator but *the* King of kings. Aren't we all tired of trying to rule our own lives, dictating our own terms, pretending we're in control? What would it look like to dethrone ourselves and give allegiance to Jesus? Cast off our pretend crowns and crown him instead as the real leader of our lives? Just as Jesus didn't want to be a *pawn-king* in the crowd's political uprising, he's not interest in being part of a *puppet regime* in our lives; where he keeps the title of, *King,* but we continue being the ones really calling the shots. Embracing Christ as *king* is to surrender control, submit to his leadership, and follow in his ways, being ruled by the one king who rules with self-giving, sacrificial, royal love.

And I wonder how many of us could desperately use a *priest*. Not just *a* priest, but the High Priest of Heaven. Not a middle-manager mediator and meddler between us and God, but a High Priest who, *as* God, brings God to us; and who, as a *human*, lifts our humanity up to God.

As the crowd debated what to do with Jesus, he quietly slipped up the mountain alone. But the next day, the crowd returns and finds him. They're hungry again, asking Jesus,

What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat. (6:30-31)

They'd seen the sign, enjoyed the food, had their fill, but they still wanted *more*. As had been the case with the *manna*, they were hoping for a *daily* miracle feeding. Jesus responds,

You are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (John 6:26-27)

As we all do, the crowd was trying to fill an unfillable hole, chasing what always *spoils* and never *satisfies*. We do this too. Whether it's literal food and drink, or substances, the next high, next compliment, the next romantic fling or sexual encounter, the next dollar, next rung of the corporate ladder, the next purchase or upgrade. We tell ourselves the next tasty morsel will

put us over the top and finally satisfy us, but it only whets our appetite for more. And we come back the next day, hungry as ever, begging for one more bite. It's a story we swallow every time.

But it's the food of fools, a loaf of lies, the bread of death. But Jesus declares,

The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Then Jesus declared, *"I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry."* (6:33, 35)

Unlike the priests waving barley around year after year in hopes of a blessing, Jesus gives us the bread of his eternal presence—*he is* the offering*; he is* the blessing—his *body*, the miracle meal, broken for us on the cross to feed and fill us, with leftovers enough to satisfy and sustain the whole world forever with *daily* bread—an eternal feast of everlasting life. And Jesus says,

"This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:51)

It was a promise Jesus would fulfill only a year later, at the *next* Passover. On that Friday, as the Passover lambs were slaughtered by the priests, Jesus was nailed to a cross, dying as a sacrificial lamb to *pass over* sin and death for us. As the crowd rested on the *Sabbath*, Jesus slept the sleep of death in a tomb where he'd been laid to rest. But Sunday morning—*at the very moment in the festival when the priest waved the barley loaves before God as the firstfruits of the new harvest*—at *that exact moment*, Jesus rose from the dead and walked out of that tomb as the firstfruits of a new creation harvest. As the Apostle Paul wrote, ***"Christ has been raised from the dead—the firstfruits of a great harvest of all who have died."*** (1 Cor 15:20)

Friends, the *Feeding-of-the-5,000* wasn't just a *moment of awe*; it was an *aha moment*, revealing Jesus as God's *Priest*, foreshadowing his death and resurrection as the firstfruits of a coming resurrection harvest for us. The *real* miracle wasn't making enough food to temporarily stave off starvation; the *real* miracle is Jesus' ability to multiply the eternally-replenishing and life-reproducing life of the Spirit in us, staving off eternal death with the Bread of Life.

That's what today's *sign*-story is all about.

One final observation: a fourth basket-ingredient, if you will.

So far in our story, we've focused on the *bread* and ignored the *fish*. But the *fish* links our *sign*-story to *another* miracle feeding, told as the final story in John's gospel. A story that takes place *(believe it or not)* on the shores of Lake *Tiberias—the only other time this Lake-name is mentioned in the Bible*. On the menu—a few loaves of *bread* and a miracle catch of *fish*. Only John uses an uncommon word for *fish*, used in the Bible *only* in these two stories. In other words, John has carefully crafted the details of these two scenes to link them to each other.

In John 21, after Jesus' death, his disciples return to what they knew—*fishing*. But it's no use; they can't catch a thing. But then, Jesus appears, *alive*, and suddenly their nets are full of fish. As the disciples rush to shore to greet the risen Lord, Jesus has a campfire going and has prepared them breakfast—a meal of *bread* and *fish*. And copy-and-pasted from John 6, he says,

Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. (Jn 21:13)

John concludes his version of the story of Jesus by connecting the *Feeding-of-the-5,000* sign to the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, because the bread isn't just an image of Christ's body broken on the cross *for us*; it's a sign of his resurrection life now miraculously multiplied *in us*.

That morning, as the waves gently lapped up the shores of Lake Tiberias, the disciples were sitting at the table of this world's one true King. As the disciples lapped up his stories of the harrowing journey to death and back again, they were hearing the prophetic voice of God—God's Word made flesh to them. And as the campfire flames crackled like the fires of the altar the temple, and their *priest* served them a sacramental meal, they were dining in the presence of God. it wasn't just their nets and bellies being filled; their hearts were full; the whole world was full of possibility. Resurrection was in the air and they were feasting the food of eternal life.

Similarly, as we come now to our own Passover meal—a feast prepared and provided by Jesus Himself, we are invited to listen to the voice of God's true **Prophet**—*the Word made flesh to us, to hear God's vision for our lives in God's own voice.* We are invited to kneel before our true **King**—*to submit to his leadership and surrender to his way of love*. And we are met in this meal by the **High Priest of Heaven**—*God with us, present to us even in this bread, an offering in of the firstfruits of a great new creation, resurrection harvest.*

As the band comes to lead us… all are welcome to come to the table, to eat, drink, and receive the *Bread of Life*; the food that satisfies and sustains us with the abundant life of the Spirit. As we eat and drink, may we sense the very life of God multiplying within us. And may what's left over be the love of Christ overflowing world around us.

Let's pray.