

In the name of God, and of God's Son, and of God's Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel reading this week is a little odd. It omits a number of verses that tell us of two monumental events: Jesus feeding the 5,000, and Jesus walking on water. Instead, the framers of the Lectionary pulled together two passages of seemingly ordinary narrative of Jesus and his disciples going about their work in the villages around the sea of Galilee. But I think we can learn something from the shape of our reading today.

When we last saw the disciples, they had witnessed Jesus' inability to do any great work in his hometown; the doubt of the people who knew Jesus limited his ministry. Jesus then sent the disciples out two by two to heal, to cast out demons, and to preach repentance in the surrounding villages. When today's Gospel reading picks up the story, they have just returned from their mission. Here's the first thing that struck me about this Gospel reading: the need for ordinary conversation with God.

The disciples have done great work; now they need to step back, to retreat, and take time to process and understand what they've just done. They continue to build relationship with their friend and teacher by talking with

Jesus, telling Jesus what it was like to go out and do this work of evangelism. After all, this was probably the first time they had done this work in Jesus' name on their own. They needed time and space to reflect on what Jesus has taught them and the fruit that teaching is bearing in their lives.

Jesus wants them to have this time of retreat; he plans to take them off to a deserted place where they won't be disturbed; but, as often happens, life intervenes. The deserted place for which they are headed is suddenly host to a crowd of people clamoring for more of what Jesus and the disciples really need a break from doing. Jesus has compassion on the spiritual hunger of the crowd and feeds them by teaching them many things. Then there are the events the Lectionary reading skips: it is late when Jesus finishes feeding them spiritually; the crowd is now physically hungry. Jesus challenges his disciples to feed them, a challenge they think is impossible; then Jesus proves them wrong by feeding 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus dismisses the people and sends his disciples away in a boat; Jesus goes up a mountain alone to pray. An adverse wind slows the progress of the disciples in the boat on the sea of Galilee; Jesus takes his sweet time praying on the mountain - all night, in

fact, not making his way to the sea until the early morning. Jesus then sees the disciples, still stuck out on the water straining against that adverse wind; so Jesus walks on the water to get to them in their boat.

After skipping over those two pretty momentous events, our Lectionary picks up the story at the moment the disciples and Jesus finally land on the other side of the lake, and they once again are faced with a spiritually hungry and physically needy crowd.

I think we can learn something from how the Lectionary treats this period in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. We are often tempted to focus on the grand gestures and the great events: feeding the 5,000, walking on water. But we need those times where we draw near to Jesus, away from the crowded happenings in our lives, and simply tell our divine listener what we've done, what has happened, and how we feel. We learn about ourselves that way; what feeds us, what exhausts us, what satisfies us; and what we should do differently and what we should do next. We need those conversations with God to understand how our way of being disciples sustains us or drains us, so we can be transformed in ways that help us grow and keep us well.

In the beginning of our Gospel reading, we see the disciples having that conversation with Jesus after their work of evangelism; Jesus then sees the need for them to rest afterward, but is thwarted by the crowds. So, Jesus meets the needs of the crowd, and attempts to send the disciples away to rest; Jesus goes up on a mountain alone to pray. And here is the other bit our Lectionary reading misses: the blessing of adverse winds.

It shouldn't have taken the disciples all night to get across the sea of Galilee; but the wind slows them down, and they're still on the sea by morning. The wind makes it impossible for them to go without pause from one huge event to the next demand of ministry. I wonder if, in hindsight, the disciples realised they had reason to be grateful for being stuck out on the sea so long; the crowds couldn't reach them there, and that time in the dark on the water would have given them a chance to do the kind of reflection they needed. If I were one of those disciples, I would probably not have strained on the oars against the wind right away; if the water was calm enough, I would have probably laid in the boat and looked at the stars and listened to the water, because that is prayer, too.

When we can't slow things down ourselves, sometimes God slows things down for us; with the right intention, that adverse wind can be an opportunity. Instead of straining at the oars all through the night, we can be still and listen. We can be still and listen to ourselves and to our friend and teacher, God, then get back to pulling on the oars when we have felt God approach us, and come close enough that the winds seem to die away and the shore seems nearer. Then we may find ourselves having grown just that much more, and become just that much more prepared to take on the work that awaits us.

“When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized Jesus, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was,” our Lectionary reading resumes. Jesus gives us the example of stepping back, of going away to quiet places to pray, of reflecting on our work, and deepening our relationship with our good teacher and friend by speaking and listening to God. The way the world shapes our lives often conspires to deprive us of the opportunity to take such time; but part of our discipleship is to allow God to shape our lives so that we can make opportunities for prayer and reflection. And sometimes, even when we feel powerless to do so, God will bless us with

unforeseen, and sometimes unrecognised space for such retreat, so that even for adverse winds, we can be thankful. Amen.