

Our Gospel lesson this morning might be a familiar one. The reason I say “might” is that this, the Feeding of the Four Thousand, is probably less well known than the Feeding of the Five Thousand. That account is probably the one we think of when we think of miraculous feedings.

Five thousand men, not counting women and children. Five loaves, two fish. It’s in all four Gospels, versus the Four Thousand, which is only recorded in Matthew and Mark.

So is today’s reading sort of a lesser account? If you know the story of the Five Thousand, do you get the point and this is just sort of bonus information, same story, different attendance numbers? Could we maybe drop this one from the appointed readings and pick up a different miracle of Jesus?

We might think so at first, but when we look closer at this account, we’ll see why the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew and Mark to record it for us, as it concerns a matter we deal with all the time.

Before we say what that matter is, let’s start by comparing the two feeding miracles. After all, the evangelist invites us to do this. We hear that a great crowd had gathered “again.” “Again,” as in, this has happened before, and so it would be good to keep that previous event in mind as we look at this one. So what happened then, as compared to now?

The numbers might be the most obvious. Last time, there were five thousand men, plus women and children. This time, four thousand men, plus women and children. Last time, they had five loaves and two fish. This time, seven loaves, and “a few” fish. Last time, the people were with Jesus for one day. This time, the crowd has been there for three days.

In addition to the numerical differences, how Jesus interacts with His disciples is different this time. Last time, He waited until they came to Him. This time, He calls them to Himself. Last time, He put a test before them, telling them, “You give them something to eat.” This time, Jesus states that the crowd is in great need of food, yet doesn’t explicitly tell the disciples to do something about it.

Have you caught a theme yet? Think of it from the disciples’ perspective. Less people. More food available. A crowd willing to wait, not just a day, but three days. Jesus being more up front and open with His intentions.

When you consider these things, this should be an “easier” miracle, right? It’s still miraculous for sure, still a great work that only God could do. But remember, they’ve seen this before! Large hungry crowd. Wilderness with no apparent source of food. Jesus! It ought to be pretty obvious what comes next, right? And yet what do they say? “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?”

We hear those words, and we wonder if the disciples have all suddenly developed a bout of amnesia. “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” I don’t know guys, how did it happen last time? You were all there! It’s ridiculous, right? How do they not know the answer? They handed out the food to the five thousand plus people!

We might even be more critical when we consider their words in light of the Old Testament. Remember, their Bible was the Old Testament, and one of the key stories out of is the Exodus, when God brought the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. You might remember

that, during the Exodus, God fed the people with bread – manna – in the desolate place – the wilderness – back then.

As young boys going through Synagogue School and being taught the Scriptures by their parents, and then attending the Synagogue themselves, they would have heard that story many times. God feeding people with bread in the wilderness wasn't exactly something new. And yet the disciples say, "How can these people be fed?"

Before we get too critical, though, let's look at ourselves in the mirror. We are faced by problems quite often. That's how life in a fallen world goes. But God has preserved us through all of them. Otherwise we wouldn't be here!

Yet how often have we been anxious when those problems come about? How many times have we worried? How many times have we thought, "How am I going to get through this?" Are we really all that different from the disciples? We have the same problem that they do.

The Lord works countless ways in our lives, every day. Sometimes we can see His deliverance firsthand, witness events that should have turned out so much worse, and yet by the grace of God, here we are. Maybe you had a great need, and then out of the blue God supplied exactly what was needed. Maybe there was an illness that you really shouldn't have made it through, according to the doctor. Maybe you were in an accident that you shouldn't have come away from in one piece. Sometimes, you see the mighty working of God with your own eyes.

Other times, it's little things, things that are just so ordinary for us that we don't stop to think about them, and yet they too are the Lord's working. Just think about the events that led up to you getting here this morning.

You woke up – not a given, which is why we thank God for it in Luther's morning prayer. And then you turned on lights, and had electricity to see, and make toast, and brew coffee. And how do we have these things, and a store where you can buy roasted beans that came from halfway around the globe? This, too, isn't a given, considering shortages we saw when the supply chain had problems.

And, in many places the coffee beans came from, they don't get to enjoy them in peace and comfort like we do, because their government might not be as stable, or functional. And with the government – we see the things our rulers do, and we groan and wonder how can they be like they are – and yet you had streets to drive here on this morning and no running gun battles or corrupt soldiers to avoid, which Christians who must meet in secret deal with every week.

How did we all get here? It's not by human efforts – again, consider those parts of the globe where you can't have a leisurely breakfast before driving a working automobile to a church that's just right out in the open. The fact that we are here, gathered together in peace around the Word of God, is a miracle.

Besides our life experiences, we, like the disciples, also have the Scriptures. In fact, we have the whole thing, not just the first part. And in those Scriptures, handed down to us under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit Himself, we have so, so many accounts of God's miraculous, loving care, His preservation and deliverance of His people from all manner of troubles. Troubles we face today.

Do we worry about our health or the health of our loved ones? Our God has healed everything from blindness to leprosy, fevers to lameness, convulsions to bleeding.

Do we worry about having enough to live on? Our God provided unfailing oil and flour for a widow, gallons of wine for a wedding, and bread for a few thousand people once or twice.

Do we worry about our government and the people in it, and how they will rule over us? Our God has sustained His people through the rise and fall of warlords, princes, kings, and emperors. The Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans – none of whom granted the same legal protections we enjoy today – all ruled over God’s people at some point, and yet God’s people were preserved.

Do we worry about family members who have strayed from the faith? Our Lord’s own brothers didn’t believe in Him during His earthly ministry, and yet He continued to speak to them, bringing them to faith after He had risen from the dead.

As much as we might think that what we’re facing is totally new and different, our God has dealt with it all before, preserving His people in the face of countless trials and tribulations, just like we have today.

The problem is, we, like the disciples, are tempted by Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh to doubt God. We look at how God has preserved us in the past, but then our human reason joins with doubt and says, “Okay, but this time it’s different,” as though God’s power is limited.

We look at how God has preserved His saints throughout the ages, but then the world comes and tells us “God doesn’t work like that anymore; those were all just lucky coincidences or stories that have been embellished and added to over the years.”

We hear the great accounts in the Bible, but then Satan whispers, “Did God really say,” leading us think that maybe the Word isn’t trustworthy. In short, we are tempted to doubt.

Doubt is a dangerous sin, a breaking of the First Commandment, where we fail to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. It’s dangerous, because like all sin, it separates us from God. When we doubt, we pull away from our Lord, thinking that, maybe we can’t really trust Him, that maybe we need to take care of ourselves this time. The more we do that, the more we pull away, the easier it is to do that, and so the weaker our faith gets.

We look to ourselves more and more instead of to God to give us what we need. As we pull away, we also set ourselves up for failure, as whatever it is we are looking to or trusting in cannot provide what we truly need. By doubting, we are setting ourselves up for a fall.

And so, when we doubt, when we give into worry, we need to repent. We must not just shrug it off, and say that everyone worries, or that that’s just the kind of person we are. Some people are more tempted to this sin than others, that’s certainly true. But we still need to repent of it and turn back to our God, trusting that He is the One who will give us every good thing that He knows we need.

And when we do this, when we repent and look to God, we can have absolute confidence that He will care for us. Though there are many differences between the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Feeding of the Four Thousand, one of the constants is the compassion of the Lord Jesus.

When the crowds approach Him before the first feeding, Jesus is moved to compassion for them, as they are like sheep without a shepherd. Here at the Feeding of the Four Thousand, Jesus tells His disciples, “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat.

And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away.”

Jesus knows their situation. He knows their need. He knows that, if He doesn't care for them, they won't make it. And He has compassion on them. He loves them, cares for them, provides exactly what is best for them. This loving compassion is what moves Him to use His almighty power to miraculously provide for them, satisfying their needs and providing more in abundance.

The Lord also shows His love and patience with the disciples. He doesn't publicly berate them in front of the crowd, or tell them to go away, that He'll find some other men who aren't so dense. And when He does rebuke them after this – while it's just them on the boat – He does so out of concern for their faith, that they not fall away into temptation.

He patiently bears with the disciples – whom He had chosen – teaching them, correcting them, showing them compassion. And especially, He forgives them.

After they had all abandoned Him in Gethsemane, He appears in their midst on that first Easter evening and grants them His peace. The next week when “doubting Thomas” is with them, Jesus offers His hands and side, that Thomas may not doubt, but believe. Sometime before He ascends into heaven, Jesus takes Peter aside privately, and three times – once for each time Peter denied Him – tells Peter to feed His sheep, entrusting Peter again with the great task of being one of His Apostles.

Our Lord looks on us with that same love and compassion. When we are tempted, He calls to us to hear His Word and turn back from what is harmful to our souls. When we fall into sin, He leads us to repentance, that we might confess our sins, and then He who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

When we are weary from the trials of this life, He will give us the strength to endure. When we struggle, He knows our situation, and He will not fail to provide for us. It may not be what we think would be best, but we're sinners, and our idea of what's best isn't often right! So He gives us what He knows is best, what will bring about our eternal good, that we might dwell with Him in paradise forever.

That's why He gives us the greatest gift imaginable – Himself. He, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, gave Himself up on the cross, for each and every one of us, that He might bring us through the wilderness of this life into the Promised Land of heaven.

As we travel through this wilderness, He gives us not only bread for our stomachs but His own body as the Bread of Heaven, which takes away our sins and strengthens our faith on the way. When Satan would try to get us to doubt, we can look at the cross, at our God and Savior hanging there, for us, each and every one of us, and know for certain that the God who was willing to die to give us eternal life will most certainly care for us in this short life.

The Holy Spirit had St. Mark write that little word, “again,” to draw our attention to the fact that our Lord provided for His people again and again. Our God will provide for us, again and again and again, sustaining us throughout all the days of this life and into eternity.

In the name of Jesus, amen.