

## **The Gospel of John Seven Signs, Seven Statements**

### **Lesson #4**

#### **Sign #4 - Jesus Feeds the Multitudes**

##### **Background**

The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the feeding of the multitude is the only miracle besides the Resurrection that is recorded in all four Gospels. But, in John's account it is not only a miracle, it is a "sign" that serves as a preface to Jesus' teaching on the true Bread of Life and points to the greater miracle of the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. There are only two food miracles in John's Gospel: the miracle that involves bread in chapter 6 and the miracle involving wine in chapter 2. Together they anticipate the Eucharistic liturgy where Jesus who is both the "new Moses" and the "new manna" gives Himself as food for the multitudes under the visible signs of bread and wine. [see CCC#1333-35].

In the Gospels several names are used for the large northern lake through which the Jordan River flows. Here John calls it the "Sea of Galilee" as well as referring to it by its Roman name, the "Sea of Tiberias." In AD 20 Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of the Galilee, built the city of Tiberias as the administrative capital of the region. He named the city and re-named the lake in honor of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar [reigned AD 14-37]. This lake was also known as Lake Gennesaret [from the Hebrew Kinnereth or Chinnereth], a name that also designated the land on the western shore. We are told in verse 16 that this event takes place across the Sea of Galilee on the opposite shore from Capernaum.

Word is spreading about Jesus' miracles. It is now almost impossible for Him to avoid crowds of people following Him in their desire to witness His miracles. Although John highlights only 7 public signs/miracles performed by Jesus, here in verse 2 as well as in 20:30 and 21:25 John tells us that Jesus worked many miracles. John chose these 7 public signs as representative of Jesus' many miracles and because they illustrate certain facets of the mystery of Jesus the Messiah. The one private "sign" of His divinity that John relates was revealed only to His Apostles is the miracle of Jesus walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee in John 6:16-21.

The text sets the scene of this sign by telling us that Jesus climbed up the hillside. The word in the literal Greek translation is "mountain" and not "hillside." Most modern translators change the wording of this passage because these elevated areas around the Galilee are not what we would call mountains. However, the Gospel writers always refer to "the mountain" [including the article "the"] when Jesus ascends a height to teach or perform a miracle because "the mountain" is an important theological symbol which links the reader to Old Testament imagery and theological events that took place on mountains.

**What are some of the Old Testament events that took place on a mountain where God revealed Himself to His people?**

1. **Eden:** Man's first home in the Garden of Eden was on a mountain or mountain plateau: See Genesis 1: 10 and Ezekiel 28: 13-16. The river that flowed out of Eden divided into 4 rivers that watered the earth. Rivers flow down stream. (Ezekiel 28:13 -14 "*You were in Eden the Garden of God ..... I made you a living creature with outstretched wings, as guardian, you were on the holy mountain of God ...*"). That Eden was the original "holy mountain" of God explains the significance of God's choice of mountains as sites for His redemptive acts and revelations. Man's goal, since the Fall, has been to return to that perfect state of communion that our first parents enjoyed in God's presence.
2. **Mt. Moriah:** Genesis 22:2 where Abram offered up Isaac; where David saw the Angel of the Lord standing with his sword in his hand ready to destroy Jerusalem until David built an altar there and made atonement through sacrifice [I Chronicles 21: 15-17]; where Solomon built the Temple of the One True God [2Chronicles 3:1].
3. **Mt. Sinai /Horeb:** God's revelation of His presence to His covenant people [Exodus 19-24], where His Law was made and the Covenant with Israel ratified. It was also at Sinai that God revealed His saving presence to His prophet Elijah and re-commissioned him as His messenger to the nations [I Kings 19].
4. **Mt. Carmel:** Carmel is the Hebrew word for garden-land. It was on Mt. Carmel that God gave the prophet Elijah victory over the false priests of Baal and through sacrifice brought His people back to Himself(I Kings 18].

What events in the New Testament are significant "mountain events" where God manifests His redemptive acts and revelations?

1. **The Mt. of Temptation:** Where Jesus resisted the temptation of Satan in Matthew 4:8-11
2. **Mt. of Beatitudes:** Jesus' first sermon where He, as the mediator of the New Covenant, delivers the "law" from "a mountain" as the new Moses [Matthew 5].
3. **The Appointment of the 12:** In Mark 3: 13-19 Jesus takes the disciples up a mountain where He officially appoints the 12 as Apostles.
4. **Caesarea-Philippi:** Where Jesus takes the Apostles up on a mountain and appoints Simon / Peter as the Prime Minister [Vicar] of His Kingdom and the keeper of the Keys Matthew 16:16-19]
5. **Mt. of Transfiguration:** Where Christ is transfigured before Peter, James, and John, revealing His glory [recalling the association with Mt Sinai where Moses saw God's glory] in Matthew chapter 17. Peter calls this "the holy mountain" in 2 Peter 1:16-18.

6. **Mt. Moriah:** Where Jesus cleansed the Temple [John 2:13-22, Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:11, 15-19; Luke 19:45-46] and condemned the faithless and unbelieving representatives of the Old Covenant people [Matthew 23].
7. **Mt. of Olives:** Where Jesus passes judgment on the Old Covenant people for their rejection of the Messiah and prophesizes the great tribulation that will fall on Jerusalem [Matthew 24]. Where Jesus, after the Last Supper, ascends the mountain with His disciples to pray [Matthew 26:30]. Where Jesus ascends to the Father 40 days after His resurrection [Matthew 28: 16-20; Acts 1:11-19].

In Hebrews 12:22 we are told that just as Moses brought the Children of Israel to God's Holy Mountain, Sinai, now Christ has brought New Covenant people to God's Holy Mountain. The Church is God's Holy Mountain, just as Mt. Moriah had been for the Old Covenant people as the site of the Temple. (*Isaiah 2:2: In the last days, the mountain of the House of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it ....*). The promise is the day will come when God's Kingdom, His "Holy Mountain", will "fill the whole earth" just as God's original dominion filled the whole earth before the Fall. The New Adam has restored God's full dominion. The establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in the New Covenant Church is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the final 5th Kingdom of the prophet Daniel 2:34-35, and 44-45.

Now it is the spring of 29 AD, a year before His Passion, and pilgrims from the Galilee and Jewish communities to the north in Roman occupied Syria are traveling south to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread in Jerusalem. In Jesus' time the week long feast was known by both names [Matthew 26:2, 17, & 19; Mark 14: I & 12; Luke 22: I, 7, 15] but John only refers to the week long feast as the Passover; he never uses the name "Unleavened Bread" for this feast. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is designated by the Law as one of the "pilgrim feasts", which required that every man of the Covenant must present himself before God in the Temple in Jerusalem [Exodus 23:14; 34:18, 23; Deuteronomy 16:16]. This feast was so important that those who could not make the trip because of illness or misfortune could celebrate a month later [Numbers 9: 1-14]. God ordained the sacrifice of this feast in Exodus chapter 12 as a perpetual commemoration and reenactment of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

There is a connection between the commemoration and reenactment of the sacrifice of this Exodus Passover event and sacrificial meal and the practice of our Catholic faith. The sacrifice of the Mass is the commemoration and reenactment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection. Since His sacrifice was complete and sufficient it does not have to be repeated as the imperfect sacrifice of the lambs and kids in the Passover festival and in the other sacrifices in the Temple. Jesus' sacrifice was complete and perfect in every way but His sacrifice is ongoing because sin and redemption is ongoing and is represented, commemorated sacramentally, and applied in the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass. Just as in the celebration of the Passover Feast and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the faithful did not have to be present at the actual event of the sacrifice of the victim at the Temple on the 14th of Nisan but they did have to be present at the reenactment of the sacrificial meal at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We do not have to be present at the sacrifice 2,000 years ago to receive the grace which flows

from the event of Christ's self-sacrifice but we do have to be present at the sacrificial meal in which His one perfect sacrifice is represented, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity to the faithful.

See the following paragraphs in the CCC: 1330, 1324 and 613

Central to the feast was the representation of the sacrifice of the lambs and kids from the first Passover. Each family or group of 10 - 12 people was required to sacrifice a lamb or kid at the Temple on the 14th day of Nisan {Abib} in a great liturgical service and that night, which at sundown became the 15th and the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, to eat a sacramental and liturgical meal in which the story of the Exodus was retold and the sacrificed victim and other symbolic foods were eaten.

Jesus gives new and greater meaning to the Passover. Jesus is the true "Lamb of God" {John 1 :29] which the Passover lambs only foreshadowed. It is Christ's redeeming work that will accomplish a new deliverance from slavery-the slavery of sin [John 8:31-36] in a sacramental and liturgical meal we call the Eucharist [John 6:53-58; Corinthians 5:7-8].

### **The Sign**

Now, if Jesus knows what He's going to do, why did He ask Phillip where they could buy food? John tells us that Jesus was testing Phillip. Why did Jesus test Philip and what was the test?

In Jn 1: 45 Philip identified Jesus as "the one that Moses and the prophets wrote about," the Prophet/Messiah, but Jesus' question is to test Philip to help him to fully understand the dimensions of Philip's first revelation of Jesus' true identity. All Philip has to do is to petition Jesus to feed the crowd.

Philip should have realized this by the way Jesus framed the question. He should have been reminded of the miraculous feeding of the multitude in Exodus chapter 16 in the feeding of the manna and the quails. But with the way Jesus framed His question there was another passage that should have come to mind for Philip.

In Numbers 11: 13 Moses asks Yahweh a question very similar to the one Jesus asks: "*Where am I to find meat to give all these people ... ?*" In this event Yahweh accepts Moses' question as a petition and provides food for the Children of Israel. Philip should have understood that the Messiah has the power to do the same miracle.

### **Besides the miraculous feeding of the multitude there are other similarities between Numbers 11 and John 6:1-63?**

1. People grumbling [Numbers 11:1 and John 6:41, 43]
2. Description of the manna coming from above -heaven [Numbers 11:7-9 and John 6:31]
3. Who will give us meat to eat [Numbers 11:5 and John 6:52ff; although Numbers uses the word 'meat' instead of 'flesh'= sarx is the Greek word for flesh, as in the John passage].

4. Where am I to find meat to give all these people .. ? Numbers 11:13 and John 6:5
5. If all the fish in the sea were collected, would that be enough for them? [Numbers 11 :22 and John 6:9].

Philip should have realized that just as God saw to the needs of the Children of Israel in ancient times so too could He meet their needs that day. Instead of petitioning Jesus to feed the crowds Philip thoughts are too earth bound and he comments on the vast amount of money it would take to feed this crowd. Two hundred denarii is a great sum when you consider that 1 denarii is equal to one day's wage [Matthew 20:2].

Now the disciples should have also remembered another miraculous feeding of a multitude in the Old Testament, in 2Kings 4:41-44, the prophet Elisha took barley loaves and fed a multitude with some bread left over. Interestingly, Elisha also fed the multitude preceding Passover also.

Now Simon-Peter's brother Andrew, perhaps remembering Elisha's miracle, offers Jesus the barley loaves and fish that will become the meal that will be multiplied to feed the great multitude of men, women and children. Wheat bread was more desirable than barley bread, and since barley bread was cheaper it was the food of the poor. Luke 11:5 seems to indicate that the loaves were small and that 3 loaves were an adequate meal for 1 person. The Greek word used for "fish," opsarion [Strong's Exhaustive Concordance # 3795], indicates that the two fish were salted and dried ..

*'make the people sit down '*..... *five thousand men sat down.* Jesus organizes the crowd. Luke's Gospel tells us that He organized them into groups of about 50 people [Luke 9:14]. Notice only the men are counted; there were also women and children so Jesus will miraculously feed well over 5,000 people. **So why mention only 5,000. 5 is a symbolic number and multiples of symbolic numbers indicates abundance. Five is the number of grace; therefore in this "sign" there is a super abundance of grace,** which prefigures the super abundance of the Eucharistic meal which will spiritual feed the multitudes of all races for all generations until the return of the King.

When the people declare *'This is indeed the prophet .. '* what do they mean? The answer to this is found in Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; the "new Moses", the One who is to be the Messiah, and the Davidic king of Israel promised in 2 Samuel 7: 11-17. The people were looking for the Messiah who would overthrow the Roman oppressors and reestablish their national independence.

So why did Jesus not allow them to proclaim Him the Messiah? Very simply, because His hour had not yet come, the crowd is not looking for spiritual salvation; they desire a national, political Messiah.

## **Private Sign – Jesus walks on the water**

That evening the disciples get in a boat and row across the lake to Capernaum. It is interesting to note that they do this on their own. Perhaps they themselves have no idea where Jesus has gone or where He is going. Matthew tells us that Jesus told the disciples to get in the boat and go to Capernaum (Mt 14: 22).

The disciples were fishermen by trade and used to being on the water at all hours of the day, and under all conditions. John tells us that the storm came up before they even left. Now under stressful conditions even people not easily frightened can become afraid; imagined dangers suddenly become very real. While the disciples may not have been frightened at rowing across the lake in a storm while standing on shore, the waves are much more powerful while in a small boat that is being tossed in all directions.

Suddenly an apparition appears! Jesus is walking towards them. Not swimming, walking. The mental image is that not only is Jesus walking on top of the water, He's not even wet. Was He? I don't know, but in my minds eye it is hard to imagine Jesus at this moment with His clothes hanging soddenly on Him, and His hair hanging limp and wet across His face. Matthew tells us that the disciples thought He was a ghost (MT 14:26), and ghosts usually no show the effects of local weather conditions.

The disciples succumb to the fear of the unknown. Jesus reassures them. “**It is I”** or “**I AM**”. This reassurance that Jesus gives to the disciples is also an act of self revelation. His words recall the holy name “I AM” that Yahweh revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3: 14). The claim to divinity inherent in this name is substantiated by Jesus’ exhibition of power over the laws of nature (6:19, Job 9: 8). Several times Jesus claims this divine title for Himself in John’s Gospel (8:24, 58; 13:19; 18:6). “**Do not be afraid**”. These words are often spoken when God reveals Himself to His people, whether directly or through an angel (Gn 26:24; Jud 6:22-23; Lk1:30).

What does this miracle mean? John tells us that they immediately reached the other shore. Matthew tells us that the disciples did Him homage (Mt14:33). One thing is for sure, the disciples had a lot of things to talk about and talk over. How did Jesus get the bread and fishes to feed everyone the day before? How did He walk across the water? How is He able to bend the laws of nature to His will to do whatever He wants? Surely He is who He says He is, but how does what He does reconcile with their perception of the Messiah? The discussions must have not only been intense, they must have also been furtive. What would Jesus do next, and how would that fit into the political messiah’s agenda?

Did the disciples have a clue about what would happen that day?

The answer next week.