

5 + 2 = 5,000

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

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We live in a scientific age where numbers have concrete meaning. Many of you have a strong mathematics background. If I were to tell you seven people are in the sanctuary this morning, you would interpret that to mean that exactly seven people in the sanctuary this morning. That's how we use numbers. The Bible is different. The Bible often uses numbers symbolically or even theologically. For example, the book of Genesis says a man named Methuselah lived to be 969 years old. If we process that through the prism of our scientific mindset, that's pretty hard to believe, isn't it? It also says that Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 when she conceived their first child. Again, that's hard to believe, if we're thinking scientifically. But if we're thinking biblically, we can acknowledge that that's an ancient way of honoring great people. They were important patriarchs and a matriarch of Judaism, and that was recognized by the use of these numbers.

I use these numbers biblically now. $5 + 2 = 5,000$. We would normally say that $5 + 2 = 7$, but in our text for today five loaves of bread and two fish were more than enough to feed 5,000 men plus women and children. So $5 + 2$ is a theological equation. Biblically speaking, it equals abundance. It equals God's provision. It equals grace. Ultimately, $5 + 2$ equals hope.

This miracle story of the feeding of the five thousand is the only Galilean miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospels. In fact, there are six versions of this event throughout the four gospels. Historians tell us that this story was especially important in the early church. The early church faced severe challenges, and they responded well to this story's message of abundance, God's provision, God's lavish grace, and ultimately its message of hope.

We have to read this story against the backdrop of the Exodus story in the Old Testament. This was not the first time the people of God had been stranded in the wilderness with no food, right? You remember from the Exodus story that Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt and to the promised land. Before they made it to the promised land, they suffered hunger in the wilderness. Moses called

out to God, and God fed the people with manna from heaven. Each day the manna appeared, just enough for that day. It was abundant. It was God's provision. There in the wilderness, it was God's grace. It was hope for the people of Israel.

Matthew is presenting Jesus as a new Moses, entering the wilderness with the people and providing what they need. It was getting late, and the disciples urged Jesus to send the people home. This was a deserted place. They had no food. But Jesus said that the people didn't need to go home. You feed them, he told the disciples. But the disciples complained that all they had were five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus then spoke the five most important words of this story: "Bring them here to me."

Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to feed the crowd. "All ate and were filled," Matthew says. They even had enough left over to fill twelve baskets.

$5 + 2 = 5,000$. $5 + 2 =$ abundance, God's provision, God's amazing grace. It equals hope.

I see in this story a message that is especially important for us too. Aren't we in a wilderness? A pandemic wilderness. Most of us have never experienced wilderness more barren than the one we are in right now. Some have not hugged their children and grandchildren in months. People are dying in our hospitals, and their loved ones can't even be at their bedside. Unemployment has skyrocketed, the GDP plummeted. Things we used to take for granted—going to dinner at our favorite restaurant, going to a ballgame, a night at the movies—are memories only. We're growing weary of this wilderness, aren't we? Our stomachs rumble for life to return to normal.

We are in a social wilderness also. Our Black and Brown friends are crying out for justice. "Hear us," they plead. Understand us. Treat us fairly. Respect our human dignity. Anger boils over in the streets, and, like the virus, it will not just go away. Our Black and Brown friends and those of us who support them are hungry for justice.

Yes, we are in a wilderness. In fact, I cannot imagine a more threatening wilderness than the one we are in today. Now, look at the meaning of this text.

One enters our wilderness with us. He provides what we need to fill our hunger. He brings hope. He brings love. He brings a call to justice. He brings everything we need to make it through this wilderness and to a promised land. So, let us eat at a table of hope this morning. There's plenty. Everyone gets to eat until you are full. Let us turn to the rich resources of our faith. Let us turn to each other with open hearts of compassion. And we will emerge from this wilderness. We will emerge because, biblically speaking, $5 + 2 = 5,000$.

We see it at this table too. This is a table of abundance. It is about God's provision, God's grace. This table is ultimately about hope. Let us prepare ourselves now to remember. A prayer of confession is printed in your worship guide. Join me as we pray together.

Prayer of Confession before the Table

We do not presume to come to Your Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in Your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Your Table. But You are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of Your dear son Jesus Christ, and to drink His blood, that we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news, friends. Nothing—not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God!