

A Sermon for Lent 4, Year B  
March 26, 2006  
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## *The Story is Not Over!*

For over a thousand years, the fourth Sunday in Lent has been a special day. And because the Gospel recalls the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, today has become known as Refreshment Sunday. During the Middle Ages, the disciplines of Lent were relaxed somewhat, and people were encouraged to celebrate and enjoy feasts. In other words, this middle Sunday in Lent was a chance to lighten things up, to relax a bit, and try to get some perspective on how things really are. That's what the lessons we've heard are about. They all share a single, important (and refreshing!) theme – but it takes a little time to find out what it is, because they don't start out that way.

For example, in the reading from II Chronicles, we hear a long summary of Israel's failures, and of its decline and defeat. It began well enough: God had pulled the Hebrew people together as a nation; he had delivered them from slavery, and had given them their land. God did everything to give Israel a good start. And all God wanted in return was for the people of Israel to be a witness to the world of what a godly community could look like.

Admittedly, they tried to do what God had asked of them, but in the end they realized that it was so much easier to be just like everybody else. It's easier to conform to the rest of the world, than to trust in the care and protection of God. And even though one of their shortcomings was their failure to keep God's laws, their biggest mistake was in the fact that, although God had called Israel to be the place where the world could look and see what life with God was really like, instead of offering the world a vision, Israel offer the world a mirror.

What happened to them next, Israel interpreted to be the judgment of God. The kingdom of Israel fell; a foreign army conquered them, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people were taken away into exile. One thousand years as a nation under God was finished. Their story, it seemed, was over.

Now hold on to that picture, because while the story of Israel ends in failure, the account of the feeding of the five thousand is a story that begins in failure.

Jesus has been teaching, and has attracted a good-sized crowd. And, in spite of having the good sense to be interested in listening to Jesus, this crowd, like so many before and since, had more enthusiasm than good sense. And when Jesus finished teaching, and moved on to the next county, the crowd simply followed him. Apparently, they hadn't given any thought for what they might need that day – until, that is, they realize it's dinner time, and they're hungry, and they've brought no provisions.

When Jesus brings this situation to the attention of the disciples – it's a teachable moment, he realizes – they are completely out of ideas. Philip focuses on what they don't have, Andrew points

out that what is available isn't nearly enough, and the rest of the disciples are probably getting ready to send everyone home. There seems to be no place to go but downhill. And like the story of Israel in II Chronicles, this little story, it also seems, was over.

But in fact, the story was not over; not for the Israelites, and not for the crowd that followed Jesus. And the Good News on this fourth Sunday of Lent – the Good News of Refreshment Sunday – is simply that the story is not over. Not for Israel. Not for that crowd. And certainly not for us.

II Chronicles goes on to tell how, in spite of everything that had happened to the Israelites, and through absolutely no merit or virtue of its own, Israel's story did not end in exile. The Babylonians are defeated by the Persians, and the king of Persia gives the Israelites their freedom. The people return to their homeland and rebuild it, and their life under God is renewed. And as for the crowd in the Gospel account, Jesus makes liars out of Philip and Andrew, and does what they thought couldn't be done. The people are fed, and there are enough left overs to look forward to sandwiches tomorrow.

Now here's the important thing to remember: in neither story do the people deserve what they received from God. They did nothing to earn anything. God simply refuses to let go; and so the story continues. In fact, the story always continues. Their story, and our story. This is what Paul had in mind when he writes:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

It does not matter what we have done, or failed to do. It does not matter if we have been as evil as the Israelites, nor as shortsighted as the crowd, or as clueless as the disciples. None of this matters, because God's grace and love are simply bigger than we are, and God refuses to allow our story to end.

When I was a seminarian in Virginia, and serving for a summer as a student chaplain at one of the local hospitals, I was asked to pray with the family of a man whom the doctors had decided would not survive his heart surgery. And so we prayed, and the man “miraculously” recovered. Now I make no claim to know what happened, because the man's family was in as much despair as those Israelites in exile, and I was as clueless as those disciples in today's Gospel reading. Clearly, and for reasons beyond me, God decided that the man's earthly story wasn't ready to be over. (However, in retrospect, I realize that if the man had died, his story would still have continued, but it would have continued in heaven.)

So, what do we make of all this. Well, certainly we know that God expects our obedience. We are still called to be the people of God, and an example to the world of a godly community. And we also know that disobedience brings with it consequences that can often be devastating. Israel clearly learned that lesson. But there's still something more that we need to take from all this, and it's that, as far as God is concerns, our stories don't end.

A young man came into my office a couple of weeks ago. He told me of his father in prison, and of his mother who was an addict. He told me about his uncle who, when this young man was a child, would beat him while reciting verses from Scripture. He told me of the various things he had done that landed him in jail. And he told me that, even though he been to counselors and had come to grips with his past, he was still very, very angry. He was desperate to get his life back on track, but he didn't know how to go about it. We talked for a while, and I invited him to come by to talk some more. He hasn't, and I don't know why, but I do know that wherever he is, God is with him, and that somehow this young man's story will continue.

“For by grace you have been saved ... it is the gift of God [and] not the result of works.”

Because the story never ends, there is always cause for hope. And that is the Good News on this Refreshment Sunday. It is simple news, it is old news, it is sometimes hidden and ambiguous news; but it is the truth. The story isn't over.

And we get to experience a little bit of what that's like every Sunday. Because every Sunday it's our chance to return from exile, and sit at the feet of Jesus, and share in the bread and wine that God provides for us. And no matter who we are, and no matter what we've done, we're always welcomed at the table of God, where there's always enough; and more.