

“They Shall Eat and Have Some Left”

2 Kings 4:42-44 • Psalm 145:10-18 • Ephesians 3:14-21 • John 6:1-21

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We’re going to talk about *food* today! If you get hungry, well, we’ll have refreshments afterward!

We have a pair of stories before us this morning about hungry people being fed. One is from the Old Testament; the other from the New; one is about Elisha, the prophet; the other is about Jesus, the Messiah. One of them is probably less familiar to you; the other is probably a great deal more.

Let’s start with the less familiar one. And let’s back up a few verses to provide some context: “When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land.” (2 Kings 4:38) It’s about nine hundred years before Jesus, and the crops have failed. There’s not enough rain; there’s not enough food.

Elisha is a prophet, one of the earliest prophets in ancient Israel. He is referred to in our passage this morning as “the man of God.” “A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.” Baal-shalishah was an obscure little village not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. We’re not entirely sure where it was, although the ancient Christian scholars Eusebius and Jerome placed it 15 miles north of Lydda, a more prominent city situated between the hill country and the Mediterranean coast. The fact that the city is called *Baal-shalishah* may indicate that its inhabitants generally worshiped the Canaanite god Ba’al. Ba’al was a weather god, with power over the lightning, wind, and – importantly! – *rain*. You can bet that during a famine, Canaanites would have been praying to Ba’al to bring them much-needed rain.

But one particular unnamed man from Baal-shalishah does something different: he brings an offering of the first fruits of his meager crops to an *Israelite* house of worship, to lay before the *Israelite* God. This is remarkable in two respects. First, if this man was a Canaanite, then he is effectively saying, “I’m giving up on my Canaanite god and choosing to worship the *Israelite* God instead.” Perhaps he hoped that the God of Israel would be able to do something to improve the famine situation that the Canaanite god Ba’al had not. Secondly, this man is offering his *first fruits*. He’s taking the *very first part of his crop that has been harvested, and giving it away*. This is good, faithful stewardship. This is what we do when we take the *first* part of our paycheck – not the last! – and we give it to the church. We give out of our *faith and trust* in God, faith and trust that *God will provide for us*, rather than out of our scarcity, out of what’s left over after we’ve paid all the bills. This is, in short, a *remarkable* act of faith. People are hungry, perhaps people in his own household are hungry, and this man is choosing to *give away* the first fruits from his crops: twenty loaves of barley and fresh grain. He does this expecting *nothing* in return – although perhaps he hopes that his faithfulness will result in a blessing from God.

Elisha receives the grain, as would have been the custom. Elisha wasn't a priest, but he is doing what the priests did: live off of the offerings brought to the temple. This was how they sustained themselves. Their job was to serve God and lead people in the worship of God; they weren't raising crops or generating an income. Elisha receives this offering, then he tells the temple servant, "Give it to the people and let them eat." The servant is amazed. "How can I set this before a hundred people?" The servant sees all sorts of problems with what Elisha has told him to do. First, this food was supposed to be for *them*, for Elisha and the others who served in the temple. If they give it away, how are *they* going to eat? Second, this servant knows a hundred hungry people. Perhaps there are a hundred people in their village, or perhaps a hundred people have come into the temple before this man, begging for food. This man has brought *twenty loaves of barley and some ears of grain*. That's nice, but it's not enough to feed a hundred hungry people! Everybody would get a fifth of a loaf, and a little bit of grain. Enough for a snack, or a light meal that would tide them over for a few hours. Not enough – nowhere *near* enough – to solve the problem. You can't mitigate a famine with just a little bit of food.

Elisha repeats himself: "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord: They shall eat and have some left." Elisha knew not only *what* God is capable of doing, but also *that* God would do it, in this particular case. Had he heard some kind of direct message from God? The servant sets the food out for the hungry people. "They ate and had some left." There were *leftovers*. One man's meager offering had filled the tummies of a hundred hungry souls – *with food to spare*. How is that possible!?!?

The second story is more familiar: the feeding of the five thousand. This is the *only* miracle of Jesus that is reported in *all four Gospels*. That suggests to me that this event was *very well known*. People talked about it. That shouldn't surprise us. Five thousand people were *there* when it happened! John describes it like this: "A large crowd" kept following Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." They saw Jesus performing *miraculous* healings. Jesus climbs up a small mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee and sits down, with his disciples around him. It might have been *this* mountain. The crowd is following. "When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'" This was a rhetorical question; John says that Jesus asked Philip "to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do." Philip is as baffled as Elisha's servant had been nine hundred years earlier. He looks at their meager resources, and he looks at the crowd. He shakes his head and says, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Another disciple, Andrew, sees something: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" This is even *less* food than what Elisha used to feed a *hundred* people – and there are *five thousand* hungry people climbing the hill! But Jesus is unfazed. His disciples get the crowd to sit down. "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." Five loaves of bread and two fish are somehow enough to feed five *thousand* people. And there are leftovers! Jesus's disciples gather up what's left – and they end up with *twelve baskets full*! You could have put those five loaves and two fish into just *one* of those baskets and had plenty of room to spare. Now, somehow, there are *twelve full baskets* of uneaten food! How is that possible!?!?

In earlier centuries, back before the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, people tended to just *accept* stories like this without much questioning or skepticism. The idea that "God provided" through a miracle was easier to accept back then than it is for many people today. Some people think stories like these are either made up, or wildly exaggerated. Other people look for rational explanations.

Maybe there was other food around. Maybe there were generous people in the crowd who had provisions with them, and they started pulling them out to spread around when the disciples started sharing the boy's loaves and fish. We modern folk sometimes have a great deal of trouble accepting the possibility that God not only *might be able to do things like this* but actually sometimes *does*.

There's a saying: "Money doesn't grow on trees." Many people believe that to be true. Money – and food – don't grow on trees. They just don't *appear*, out of thin air, as if by *magic*. But here's what I can tell you after 21 years of pastoral ministry: sometimes, money – and food – *do* appear, out of thin air, as if by magic. I've seen it happen. Remember those stimulus checks the government was giving out during the pandemic? Sheren and I received calls from a few of our church members – people saying, "I don't need this money. Can you give it to somebody who *does*?" And we did. We were able to help some people who were hurting financially, simply because some other people wanted to be generous. God was *motivating* them to be generous. In recent years we've had a number of situations like that. There have been numerous times when Sheren said to me, "I received a phone call from someone who wants to give us some money." There have been times when we have been surprised and blessed to receive a generous bequest that we weren't expecting, because someone had thought to include the church in their will. There was a time not long ago when a member called me up and said something like this: "God has been good to me this year. I've got some money I want to give away. What can I do with it to put it to good use?" I've seen this type of thing happen enough times over the course of the past 21 years to tell you that the saying "Money doesn't grow on trees" really isn't true. Sometimes, it *does*. Sometimes, money *appears*, out of thin air, as if by magic. Or ... by *miracle*. God puts it in people's hearts to be *generous* to those who are less fortunate. Have you seen what happens here every Wednesday morning, downstairs in the dining room? A team of volunteers – people who care! – prepare 84 lunches for folks at Advent House in Lansing. Advent House is a non-profit organization providing help and hope for those who struggle with poverty and homelessness. The money we spend to prepare these meals comes partly out of our annual church budget and partly from individual donations – from people who care. Eric VanDyke, our faithful Sexton, delivers those meals into Lansing each week. I haven't been there for a delivery, but I'm sure there must be joy in the room. Sometimes, money – and food – really *does* grow on trees. Trees like *our church*. Trees like *generous people*.

In our world today, about 800 million people don't have enough food to eat. That's about *one-tenth* of the world's total population. A recent UNICEF Global Report on Food Crises reveals that nearly 282 million people experienced *high* levels of *acute* hunger last year – 24 million more than in 2022. A large part of the dramatic increase is a direct result of the wars that have been taking place in Gaza and Sudan. The people who have been hit the hardest are children and women; the report says that "there were over 36 million acutely malnourished children under age 5 across 32 countries in 2023." António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General, has said, "This crisis demands an urgent response." There is *more than enough* food to go around on this planet ... look at how much food gets wasted in our country *every single day!* ... and yet ten percent of the planet remains hungry. How is *that* possible?!

Money – and food – don't grow on trees. Except ... sometimes ... they *do*. What more can we do, together, as a church? What more can you do, individually, in your own generosity? What more could *Jesus* do, through people like us, to help create a world in which "they shall eat *and have some left*?"

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