

John 6:1-15

I. John 6:1 — After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.*

In John's Gospel, this is Jesus' third visit to Galilee, and it's this visit to Galilee that Matthew, and Mark, and Luke are most taken up with. Here in John, though, all we'll have is this one chapter before Jesus leaves again for Jerusalem. So when John says, "after these things," that's a general reference to the passing of some undisclosed amount of time. It was during this time that Jesus had at some point travelled north again to Galilee (because the last thing we knew He was in Jerusalem). It was also during this time that Jesus performed a great number of the miracles in Galilee that we read about in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It was also during this time that Jesus sent out the twelve Apostles two by two to the various towns and villages in Galilee to proclaim that people should repent and to cast out demons and heal the sick (cf. Mk. 6:7-13). All this John skips over in order to come to our passage today. "*After these things* Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias."

II. John 6:2-3 — And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.

We know from Mark that Jesus went away with His disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee in order to find a quiet, "out of the way" place where they could rest (Mk. 6:31-32). That's the impression we get even from these words in John: "Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples." But it seems certain to me that there's more behind these words.

Notice how John refers not to "a mountain" but rather to "*the mountain*" (*ho oros*). We see the same thing happening in the other Gospels. In Mark 3 Jesus "went up on *the mountain*" and called the twelve Apostles (Mk. 3:13-15). In Matthew 5 Jesus "went up on *the mountain*" and taught His disciples (Mat. 5:1). In Matthew 14 Jesus "went up on *the mountain*" to pray (Mat. 14:23). In Matthew 15, Jesus "went up on *the mountain*" and healed the sick and fed the four thousand (Mat. 15:29). In Luke 9, Jesus "went up on *the mountain*" and was transfigured before His disciples (Lk. 9:28-29). In none of these places is "*the mountain*" or "*the hill*" ever named or identified. So why, then, is it always "the mountain"? Is it possible that in the Gospels this is a purposeful echo of "*the mountain*" (*ho oros*) in Exodus where God came down and made a covenant with Israel? (cf. Exod. 19:2-3, 12-14, 16-17, 20, 23; 20:18; 24:4, 12, 15, 17-18; 25:40; 26:30; 27:8; 32:1, 15, 19; 34:2-3, 29; Deut. 4:11; 5:4-5, 22-23; 9:9-10, 15, 21; 10:1, 3-5, 10) Of course, there's no more famous mountain in all the Old Testament than Mount Sinai, "the mountain of *God*" (cf. Exod. 3:1; 4:27; 24:13; 1 Kings 19:8). And as it turns out, the Greek phrase that we've been seeing here in the Gospels—"went up on the mountain" (*anabaino eis ho oros*)—that exact phrase appears only seven times in the Old Testament (LXX) and in all but one of those places it's Moses who we're told "went up on the mountain" (Exod. 19:3, 20; 24:13, 15, 18; Deut. 10:3). In the same way, four times in the Gospels we hear of Jesus "coming down from

* Tiberias was a city founded by Herod Antipas (Tetrarch of Galilee) on the west shore of the central to southern half of the Sea of Galilee. By the time John was writing his Gospel, the name of the city had been transferred to the lake itself as an alternate name.

the mountain” (*katabaino apo/ek ho oros*; Mat. 8:1; 17:9; Mk. 9:9; Lk. 9:37) and five of the six times we hear those same words in the Old Testament it’s Moses who is “coming down from the mountain” (*katabaino ek [or epi] ho oros*; Exod 19:11, 14; 34:29; Deut. 9:15; 10:5). Could there be any significance, then, in Jesus’ action and in the language John uses to describe it?—“Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.”

Throughout the Gospels, we see this theme of Jesus being the fulfillment of Moses and the Law, so that Jesus can say in Matthew 5 after He “went up on the mountain”: “You have heard that it was said [in the law of Moses]... but I say to you....” (Mat. 5:21-48). It was also while Jesus was “on the mountain” that He explained how He had not come to abolish or replace the Law or the Prophets, but rather to reveal their true meaning (what they truly required) and to accomplish their true “fulfillment” (Mat. 5:17-20, 48). In Mark 3 when Jesus “went up on the mountain” and set apart the twelve Apostles (representing the calling of a New Covenant people), we might remember God’s calling and setting apart the twelve tribes of Israel (the Old Covenant people) at Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 19:3-6; 24:3-8). In Matthew 14 when Jesus “went up on the mountain” to pray, we might be reminded of Moses going up on the mountain to pray and intercede for the people of Israel (cf. Exod. 32:30-32). In Luke 9 when Jesus “went up on the mountain” and was transfigured before His disciples the two men who were talking with Him on the mountain were Moses and Elijah, both of whom stood before the Lord on the same mountain, Mount Sinai (or Horeb) – the “mountain of God” (Lk. 9:30; 1 Kings 19:8, 11).

The “mountain of God” in the Old Testament was Mount Sinai where Moses “went up” to God and God came down to meet with him. Perhaps we could say that in the Gospels, the “mountain of God” is *whatever* mountain Jesus ascends (cf. Mat. 28:16). On the one hand, we see in Jesus God Himself who has *come down* on “the mountain.” Think especially of the contrast between the intrinsic glory of Jesus revealed in His transfiguration on the mountain and the fading reflection of the glory of God that was revealed on the face of Moses after he had been on the mountain (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7, 13, 18; 4:6). But if we see in Jesus God Himself *come down* on the mountain, we also see in Jesus the one greater than Moses who “*went up* on the mountain.” Here in John’s Gospel, we read in chapter one:

- John 1:16–17 — From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

In chapter five, in the verses right before our passage this morning, Jesus says:

- John 5:45–46 — “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.”

There will be even more about Moses later on in this chapter (cf. 6:30-33). And now we read in verse two: “Jesus went up on the mountain [*anerchomai eis ho oros*], and there he sat down with his disciples.” *Like* Moses, Jesus “went up on the mountain,” but Jesus didn’t go up to receive a law, but rather to proclaim to His own disciples the fulfillment of that law in Himself and in His kingdom of righteousness. *Like* Moses, Jesus went up on the mountain; *unlike* Moses, Jesus sat down with His disciples. It’s both the “like” and the “unlike” that helps us to really grasp who

Jesus is. Jesus doesn't appear out of nowhere, does He? Jesus comes "in the fullness of time" as the one for whom all of salvation history has been preparing and the one in whom all of salvation history is finally summed up and "explained" (Gal. 4:4).

- Ephesians 1:7-10 — In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure **which he set forth in Christ for the administration of the fullness of the times, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth, in Him.**

We know from Mark that Jesus went away with His disciples in a boat in order to find a quiet, "out of the way" place where they could rest. But "a large crowd was following him," John says. Mark tells us that the people recognized Him in the boat and ran on foot to where He was going (Mk. 6:33). And why were they following Him? "Because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick." By now, these words have an ominous sound. But then John goes on to say in verse four:

III. John 6:4 — Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.

That means that at least a full year has passed (if not two) since Jesus had His conversation with Nicodemus and "cleansed" the temple in Jerusalem. But John isn't just telling us how much time has passed or what time of the year it is.[†] This is another reminder that we're meant to read what's about to happen not as a random event or just an amazing miracle, but in the full light of the whole sweep of salvation-history. We're meant to read what's about to happen not only in the light of Moses who fed the people with God's words, but also in the light of that first Passover *feast* that the people celebrated under Moses when God spared all the firstborn of Israel and brought the people out of Egypt.

"Jesus **went up on the mountain**, and **there** he sat down with his disciples. Now **the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.**" And now we should be quite ready to understand and love what happens next.

IV. John 6:5-6 — Lifting up his eyes, therefore, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.[‡]

When John says that Jesus "lifted up His eyes" and "saw" this could just be a way of saying, "Jesus looked up and saw." But there's more in these words than just that. By emphasizing the "lifting up of His eyes" and the "seeing" John is drawing attention to how *what Jesus sees* will move Him to *do what He does*. So what is it that Jesus sees? He doesn't just see a crowd—or

[†] Outside of the final Passover when Jesus was crucified, John's mention of the three other feasts is always an explanation at the most basic level for why Jesus goes up to Jerusalem (cf. 2:13; 5:1; 7:2-10). There is no mention, however, of Jesus going up to Jerusalem for this particular Passover feast (though He may well have done so).

[‡] Mark tells us that it was the disciples who first asked Jesus to send the crowds away so they could go into the surrounding villages and buy themselves something to eat (Mk. 6:35-36). But John wants us to see that the initiative was all along with Jesus. Jesus knew from the very beginning (even before the disciples asked Him to send the crowds away) what He would do.

even a crowd coming to sabotage this brief retreat with His disciples. He sees people who are needy. Mark says that when Jesus saw the crowd, “He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (cf. Mk. 6:34). The first shepherd of Israel was Moses.

- Psalm 77:20 — You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.
- Isaiah 63:11 (cf. Ps. 78:70-72) — Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock?

But now Jesus has come to be the one greater than Moses – the “true” shepherd of the sheep who feeds them, and binds up all their wounds, and protects them, and cares for them, and leads them. We can see this theme not only in Mark but also here in John. When Jesus “*lifted up His eyes*” and “*saw*” that a large crowd was coming toward Him, what He saw was sheep who needed a shepherd, and it’s because of what He *saw* that He was moved to *do* what He did. “Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’ He said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do.”

John skips over the fact that Jesus first taught the crowd many things (cf. Mk. 6:34) and comes straight to this question. Why is the question directed to Philip? Because right now according to Luke they’re in the vicinity of Bethsaida (Lk. 9:10) and the village of Bethsaida is where Philip is from (Jn. 1:44; 12:21). So if anyone should know where bread can be purchased Philip should.

V. John 6:7-9 — Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley cakes and two fish, but what are they for so many?”

When Jesus asks, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat,” He knows just as well as Philip does that that’s an “impossible” proposition. And Philip should have known that Jesus knew this. Yes, it’s “impossible” for the disciples to buy enough food to feed this crowd. But that’s exactly the point. And that’s what Philip doesn’t see. Mark tells us that Jesus responded to Philip by telling the disciples to go and see what food they had on hand (Mk. 6:38). But John skips over that, moving right from the incredulous words of Philip (“Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little”) to the incredulous words of Andrew: “There is a boy here who has five barley cakes and two fish, but what are they for so many?” And once again, isn’t that exactly the point?

In asking such a ludicrously impossible question, Jesus is testing the disciples. He’s inviting them to look not at the impossibilities of the situation, but to look to Him for the *provision* of what *He Himself* has called for. Even more ultimately, He’s inviting them to look to Him and see in Him the shepherd who feeds and cares for the sheep. He’s inviting them to see in Him the Messiah who spreads a table of feasting in which the “old” feast of Passover is fulfilled (cf. Mat. 8:11; Lk. 22:14-18). “Where are we to buy bread, that these people may eat?” We can be reminded at this point of two passages in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 25:6-9 — **On this mountain** the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a **feast** of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up **on this mountain** the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

- Isaiah 49:8–10 — Thus says the LORD: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ **They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.**”

VI. John 6:10 — Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.

The normal words for “sitting” are *kathizo* and *kathemai* (cf. 6:3), but Jesus doesn’t use either of those words. He uses a word that almost always, and that does everywhere else in the New Testament refer specifically to reclining at a “table” for a meal (*anapipto*; Lk. 17:7-8; Jn. 13:12, 25; cf. Sirach 35:1-2; Tobit 2:1-2).

- Luke 11:37 — While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and **reclined [reclined at the table for the meal]**.
- Luke 14:8–10 — “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not **recline** at the place of honor... when you are invited, go and **recline** in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who **recline** with you [who **recline at the table** with you].”
- Luke 22:14–16 — When the hour came, **he reclined [at the table]**, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”

But, of course, here in John chapter six, when Jesus tells the disciples to have the people “recline,” there doesn’t seem to be any “table” and as yet there isn’t any meal. Looking back years later, John adds this observation, “Now there was much grass in the place.” We know from the fact that the Passover was near that it was springtime and so especially now the grass in Galilee would have been thick and green (cf. Mk. 6:39). But why does John tell us this? The people could obviously sit down even if there wasn’t any grass—although it wouldn’t have been nearly as comfortable. But is John just telling us about the people’s comfort? It seems that what he really wants us to see here in this lush carpet of grass is the table for the meal; the “banquet hall,” as it were, in the “wilderness.” “Jesus said, “Have the people recline [at the table].” Now there was much grass in the place. **So the men reclined [at the table]**, about five thousand in number.”

And now how will this host at the table provide the meal for His guests? How will this shepherd prepare the table for the sheep (cf. Ps. 23)?

VII. John 6:11a — Jesus then took the cakes, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.

The picture just keeps getting more and more vivid. Not only does Jesus, as the host, “give thanks” before the meal, but John says that He distributed the cakes “to those who were *seated*.” Why not just say that He distributed the cakes “to the people” (*anthropos*; 6:10)? John uses yet another word here that refers specifically to people reclining for a meal (*anakeimai*; Mat. 9:10; 26:7; Mk. 14:18; 16:14; Lk. 22:27; Jn. 12:2; 13:23 cf. 1 Esdras 4:10). So the point of referring to the people here as “the reclining ones” is really just to describe them as the *guests* at the table. In Matthew 22 Jesus says of a wedding hall that it was “filled with reclining ones [with *guests at the table*; *anakeimai*]” (Mat. 22:10-11; cf. Mk. 6:26; see also the use of *anapipto* in Luke 14:10). So we could put it all together like this: “Jesus said, ‘Have the people recline [at the table for the meal].’ Now there was much grass in the place. So the men reclined [at the table for the meal], about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the cakes, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to the [guests at His table].”

John isn’t hiding the fact that a miracle has just taken place. But do you see how carefully he avoids any “sensationalizing” of the miracle?—“Jesus then took the cakes, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to the guests at the table.” And why do you think John does this? Because he wants us to see the miracle not just for the miracle’s sake, but as a “sign” that we’re meant to *understand*. Jesus distributed the cakes to the guests...

VIII. John 6:11b–13 — So also the fish, **as much as they wanted**. And when they had **eaten their fill**, he told his disciples, “**Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.**” So they gathered them up and **filled twelve baskets** with fragments from the five barley cakes left by those who had eaten.

Over and over in these words it’s the lavishness and the abundance of the meal that’s emphasized and therefore also its wholly miraculous nature. One commentator says it like this: “after all have been satisfied there is more left over than there was at the beginning” (Bultmann, quoted in Carson).

What are we meant, then, to *understand*? Here is the one who supplies abundantly for all the needs of all His people (cf. twelve baskets for the twelve tribes of Israel?). Here is the Shepherd who feeds, and protects, and leads, and cares for the sheep. Here is the one who fulfills the Passover with an even greater deliverance of His people. Here is the Messiah who spreads a table of feasting on the mountain. Here is the one with limitless resources and divine power who richly supplies the needs of all His people.

So how should we respond to this sign once we’ve truly understood it? Should we make a list of all that we’ve deemed our needs to be and then come to Jesus presumptuously assuming that He will meet those “needs” according to our expectations? Is that what this sign means? Or does this sign call us to come to Jesus humbly, trusting that He who fed the five thousand (plus women and children) with five barley cakes and two fish must know what all our true needs are, and confident that He will meet all our needs according to the limitless resources of His divine power and His own perfect wisdom and love? Do we see only a *miracle* that leads us to come to Jesus

presumptuously expecting, or do we see a *sign* that leads us to come to Jesus humbly and joyfully surrendering? Once we've truly understood this sign, we can come to the table that Jesus spreads and sit down and eat and be filled.

We already know why the crowd was following Jesus: "Because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick." But they didn't *understand*. So we're not surprised when we read in verses 14-15:

IX. John 6:14-15 — When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Jesus withdraws from all those who come to Him in self-centered presumption. But Jesus offers Himself—and all the limitless resources at His disposal—to all who come to Him in humble trust and childlike faith.