

I want to do something a little different in our reading of Scripture this morning. I am going to read an Old Testament passage and then a New Testament passage and then an Old Testament passage and then a New Testament passage. I am going to read the Scriptures this way because a lot of times we read stories of Jesus' words and his miracles and think that there is no connection to events in the Old Testament. And the two events from Mark that I am going to read are good examples of that.

I am first going to read Ezekiel 17:22-24. Ezekiel is an Old Testament prophet. The book which bears his name is a collection of writings which were written to the Hebrews during the time when they had been removed from their land and they were exiles. Here these words which Ezekiel recorded for them.

Read Ezekiel 17: 22-24

Next I am going to read from Mark 4: 26-33. This text includes a parable that Jesus uses to try to describe what the kingdom of God is like. As I read this, see if you can make the connection to what Ezekiel had to say to his audience.

Read Mark 4:26-34

The next text I am going to read comes from 2 Kings 4:42-44. In this text, the prophet Elisha is faced with a problem. There is a famine in the land and Elisha is with a group of prophets. Listen to what happens in this story.

Read 2 Kings 4:42-44

Now I am going to read Mark's version of the feeding of the 5000. This is found in Mark 6:35-44. As I read Mark's version, pay attention to where the 5 loaves of bread and two fish come from. The origin of the food is different than say John's account of the feeding of the 5000. Also of note is that this miracle is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all 4 gospels.

Read Mark 6:35-44

Pastor Sharon Hiers from Atlanta tells the story of her experience in Ecuador in 2007. She traveled with several students from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee to Quito, Ecuador. The primary purpose of the trip was to record the stories of the first ever gathering of leaders from around the globe making a difference in their communities and in the world.

Sharon and her students stayed at a fine hotel, where they dined in the top floor restaurant, and had access to workout rooms, and swimming pools. One of her traveling companions was Will, a self-identified atheist with a deep passion for all people, particularly the forgotten in the world. Will had spent a previous summer working in Quito, living and serving in one of the poorest communities of Carmen Bajo.

Will, the atheist, was not content to sit in luxury at Hotel Quito, knowing that within miles was a community hungry for food, for work, for education, for someone to recognize them. So, one afternoon, the group had some free time, and Will encouraged Sharon to go with him, to visit his friends in Carmen Bajo to see how different life was just a few miles away.

Since Will was the only one of the two of them that was fluent in Spanish, he arranged a cab, and they stopped in at a local bakery on their way to grab something for lunch. With the change from a \$10 bill, they bought most of the loaves of bread the bakery had on hand, with plans to take them to the family of 10 they were going to visit.

On the ride over, the scenery changed quickly from the window of that cab. As they drove out of Quito proper, the buildings became smaller as more and more streets turned to dirt-covered roads. Row after row of homes began to emerge; with one stark similarity...each one was surrounded by a fence, 8 feet tall, embedded with jagged glass across the top, to deter anyone from trying to climb over them. It was evidence of the stories of their lives, the poverty in which they lived, the protection they had for the little bit they owned.

When the cab driver finally reached the edge of Carmen Bajo, the road ran out, so he let off Pastor Sharon and atheist Will at the end of a dirt path, and they walked the rest of the way in. On their way, Will pointed out the homes just across a valley that had slipped off the mountainside, remnants of all the family possessions cascading down the hill side.

Just as they crested the top of a mound of dirt, the slope on the other side came in to view. For as far as the eye could see, there was one cinder block dwelling after another, each with a person or two outside, looking around for something to do, somewhere to be. In Carmen Bajo the unemployment rate is over 80%, mostly due to lack of education in the 500 or so families that live there.

That afternoon, like most, there were a number of people in the area, shuffling the dirt, watching the kids, shading themselves from the sun...and there Pastor Sharon and atheist Will were among them. As they stood at the crest of that hill with their equivalent of 5 loaves of bread and two fish - looking at all those hungry faces, what Pastor Sharon said was needed was a miracle of biblical proportions.

But she shares that on that afternoon, outside of Quito, on that hill in Carmen Bajo, there was no miracle of biblical proportions. The same number of loaves they showed up with were all the loaves they had to share. Not everyone they saw that

day was fed with bread, nor was there anything left over. But something very unexpected did happen. Maybe even a miracle.

Atheist Will and Pastor Sharon visited with the family they came to see. They gave them the bread they had purchased, and the family was grateful. They shared about how they knew that God loved them, and that God would provide. And they pointed to that day's food, the bread which had been brought.

But it was right at the end, when they stood up to leave, that the unexpected occurred. The mom in the house asked Will to pray for them. And so there they were, circled together; two Caucasian Americans from a wealthy school with a family of uneducated Ecuadorians - three generations strong, with six squirming children, and the atheist in the middle, praying to God.

And pray to God he did. As Pastor Sharon shares, "I didn't understand the Spanish words he said, but I have never heard, or maybe felt, a more beautiful prayer in all my life."

When Will finished his prayer, every person in the family said the only three English words they might have known: God bless you. God bless you. God bless you. Over and over and over they said this.

Pastor Sharon and atheist Will had come to visit this family, to let them know that someone cared, to bring them a little something to eat, to make sure they knew they had not been forgotten. And what Pastor Sharon and her atheist friend Will received was the presence of Christ in a circle of people unexpectedly gathered together that day.

This story and these 4 readings make clear to me something very important. God and Jesus are in the business of taking small things and doing big things. Think about that in terms of your life and the life of this church. God and Jesus are in the business of taking small efforts and doing big things with these small efforts.

You and I should never doubt what God can do if we faithfully put forth our efforts to serve God and serve others. AMEN.