

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2026

The Epistle, Galatians 4:21-31 - The Gospel, St. John 6:1-14

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Today is the first Sunday in Lent where the gospel does not talk about the devil or demons. Having vanquished the evil, Jesus now reveals himself to us in the feeding miracle as the one who fills the empty space. As he said in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is in every gospel, but St. John's account gives unique details. The feeding miracle was so popular with the crowd that the people wanted to make Jesus their ruler. In the verse just after today's gospel, St. John says, "When Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone" (Jn. 6:15).

This first century crowd didn't understand who Jesus is and what he came to do. Consequently, they did what crowds of every age do when Jesus is popular. They heard Jesus' message through the filter of their own desires and expectations. Everyone in Israel did this. The leaders evaluated Jesus in comparison with their own program for saving Israel. The crowd of John 6 was focused on daily concerns, like how to put food on the table. In the feeding miracle, Jesus answered that question.

We are just like them. We naturally hear Jesus' message through the lens of our own unique points of view and daily concerns. This tendency is heightened in a consumer culture, where the default attitude is to see Jesus as another product or service offered to give us what we want. However, God's word works in the other direction. It challenges our points of view and daily focus. It calls us to repent; to change the way we think about life and the world because we now see who Jesus is.

The crowd in the gospel had pursued Jesus around the Sea of Galilee. They had seen the miracles Jesus performed on the southwestern shore. When Jesus got into a boat to sail to the north shore, this crowd ran ahead to meet him—a journey on foot of somewhere between five and twelve miles. The crowd was large in New Testament terms. The feeding miracle describes five thousand *men*. This suggests a movement with a militant spirit, like various groups of men today who band together and are ready to do sacrificial—and sometimes stupid—things for their cause.

This implication highlights the command Jesus gives. He tells the apostles to "Make the men sit down." Here is a growing crowd of activist men ready to enlist Jesus as their leader. Jesus tells them to stop. Sit down. Receive the gift of life. Listen to me and change the way you look at everything.

We are now past the halfway point of Lent. Today is called Refreshment Sunday, because of the feeding miracle, and Mothering Sunday, because the epistle says, "Jerusalem, which is above is free, which is as the mother of us all." It is a Sunday to reflect on our experience of Lent so far, and to refocus for our final three-week pilgrimage to Easter through the cross.

There are similarities between the gospel activists and our typical approaches to Lent. We bring our agendas into the Lenten fast. We have a program for what we will give up, what we will add, and what we will accomplish through the fast. The problem is not with the things we plan to do and not do. The problem is that it is *my* plan, which is subconsciously rooted in a dependence on my own will power. This can easily digress into religion practiced according to what the New Testament calls “the flesh.” This leads to frustration, compromise, and no “fruit of the Spirit.”

This was Israel’s experience in relationship to the Torah that St. Paul describes in the New Testament. In Romans 8, St. Paul describes the answer to this problem of human futility. He writes:

What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

This tells us two things. First, Jesus did for us what we cannot do. Second, we can do what Jesus did only if we live “according to the Spirit.”

To live according to the Spirit means to be governed by the motivating force of the Holy Spirit rather than by our disordered impulses, which the Bible calls the flesh. To move from life according to the flesh into life according to the Spirit, we must learn a new pattern. Life in the Spirit begins with surrender to God and his will and word—“Make them sit down.” And it begins with a question rather than a plan. It is the question that the militant Pharisee Saul asked after Jesus met him on the Road to Damascus and made him sit down. Saul asked Jesus, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Act 9:6).

I have come to realize over the years that the main benefit to the first part of Lent is to experience, on some level, the failure of our plan. This brings us to a new surrender of faith and trust, which is the point at which Jesus can begin to do a new work in our lives. This is why Jesus tells us today to sit down. And it is why, if we are willing to sit and listen, our Lenten focus will shift to a question: “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

The new pattern of life in the Spirit is revealed in our celebration of the Eucharist on the first day of the week, which is the beginning of our time in Christ. Old Covenant time was six days of labor hoping to achieve the promised rest at the end, which Israel never reached. Christ entered that rest on Holy Saturday. Then, on Sunday, he inaugurated the new time of the new creation through his resurrection. Our time in Christ now begins not with labor but with rest. We sit down before Jesus in the Eucharist. We let him feed us and we listen for his word to us.

On Refreshment Sunday, just past the halfway point of Lent, Jesus wants us to sit with him and listen to him. He wants us to remember that our eternal life does not depend on what we have done or not done. It depends on what Jesus has done and what he is doing in us. As Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).