

Manna from Heaven

Sermon 108 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 1, 2021

John 6: 24-35

Bruce Nolan is a TV news reporter, played by Jim Carrey, in the 2003 blockbuster film, Bruce Almighty. When the movie begins he has a pretty good life. He's got an amazing girlfriend appropriately named, Grace, played by Jennifer Aniston. He's got a steady job and a group of friends who seem to care about him. But Bruce also has a healthy dose of confidence and a double portion of ambition. When he is passed over for a promotion at work, the coveted anchorman job, Bruce doesn't take it so well. In fact, he takes it so poorly that he blames God for all of his disappointments.

There's a great scene that shows Bruce in his car, driving recklessly away from his apartment. He left so he could just drive a bit and clear his mind. It is a breaking point for his character. In a full blown tizzy, Bruce prays out loud to God as he drives, asking for a sign, demanding that God show up and make it clear that he (Bruce) hasn't been deserted by God, forgotten, abandoned, and alone. As Bruce prays to God for a sign, he drives past a big flashing construction sign that reads: "Caution Ahead," in big orange letters. Just as he speeds past that one, he says, "Ugh, I need your guidance, Lord, please, send me a sign!" At that moment a truck carrying road signs like "Stop," "Wrong Way," and "Caution" pulls out in front of him. As the background music plays angelic tones indicating to the audience that *these* are the signs God is sending, Bruce, oblivious to all the signs God is sending interrupts his prayer with, "UGH, what is this joker doing?!" as he swerves around him and picks back up with the prayer.

Back in his lane his eyes land on the rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror. He grabs them in his hand and says, "Alright, I'll do it your way... Lord, I need a miracle, I'm desperate, I need your help Lord, reach into my life and..."

This time the prayer is interrupted as the musical crescendo reaches its climax with the sound of Bruce's tire hitting a huge pothole which jolts the rosary out of his hands and onto the floorboard of the car. A short moment later, Bruce has retrieved them and flashes a victorious smile just seconds before his trip crashes to a sudden halt as his car runs into a pole.

Angrier than ever, Bruce steps out of the car, walks over to the side of a nearby bridge and throws the rosary over, into the water yelling, "Fine! The gloves are off, Pal. Come on, smite me, Almighty Smite-er! You're the one who should be fired! The only one around here, not doing his job, is YOU!" His prayer and the scene end with his agonizing cry of "Answer me!!!!" in the place of "Amen."¹

¹ <https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/bruce-almighty/give-me-a-sign>. Retrieved July 31, 2021.

Like most of Jim Carrey's roles, the character he plays as Bruce Nolan is a brilliant hyperbolic expression of the way so many of us go looking for God. Like Bruce, on normal days our need for supernatural signs of God's presence, attention, and concern can go somewhat unnoticed. Things are going well, so we don't really have anything to complain about, no one to blame or thank but ourselves. But, like Bruce Nolan, on these days we can tend to overlook the seemingly less glamorous gifts that remind us of God's care and concern in the most mundane moments. Take Grace, for example. Both the character in the movie and the concept in our own lives. How many times do we experience G[ra]ce, and forget where [she]/it comes from in the first place?

While I don't believe Hollywood film-makers had today's Gospel reading from John in mind when they wrote this particular scene, I do believe the crowds and the disciples we follow in this text are playing out a very similar, very human drama... in their own way.

The biblical scene opens with a crowd searching for Jesus and the disciples after he'd performed the miracle of feeding five thousand with just a few fish and loaves of bread. In context, this is the fourth in a series of signs John lines up in his version of the Good News. With each sign, the crowd grows more and more anxious to know who this person is who performs such miracles? Who is this Jesus who heals the sick and feeds our hungers?

With so many unanswered questions and an ever-growing thirst for information, the crowd searches for Jesus and they don't find him where they expect.

When they do find him, with his disciples, on the other side of the sea, they have a new question: "When did you come here?"

Like the crescendos of the cinematic experience in the film *Bruce Almighty*, Jesus' first words, "Very truly, I tell you..." are our clue that what is coming next is like a truck full of signs passing un-noticed as the main character prays for divine intervention.

You are looking for me, but not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill... you've got it all out of whack. You live your life searching for things that do not satisfy, that do not endure, things that make you feel secure in the moment, but not things that ultimately matter. Those pass right by, without being noticed, received, or cherished.

Well, what sign will you give us then? So that we may see it and believe? Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Citing Moses as a credible prophet and leader, the crowds offer up their example, tried and true from their tradition.

Very truly, I tell you... Jesus starts up again... *it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven... it was God. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...*

Give us this bread always they ask, sounding like Bruce Nolan driving the car, oblivious to all the signs.

I am the bread. he says. *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

Here, in the Gospel, John is telling his audience, like an award-winning, Hollywood screenwriter that the crowds of people, are missing all the signs they say they are looking for. In chapter 4, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well, there she gets water for her physical thirst but she also gets more from Jesus. In chapters 4 and 5 Jesus heals the bodies of an official's son and then a man who could not walk. The people want their illness healed, Jesus heals their bodies, but offers so much more. In chapter 6 they gather without provision for their physical hunger. Jesus fills their bellies but then tries to tell them that their physical needs will certainly be met but that cannot be all that they learn to search for, these cannot be the only signs that they see, because there is so much more food on the table – spiritually speaking, of course.

In the context of the larger Gospel of John, Jesus is on the move, meeting the people, literally the world. The crowds are intrigued by the miracles and wonderful things he is doing but they don't have the spiritual imagination to ask the right questions.

They ask for individual healings, people they know and love, people they see on the side of the street... "Show us your power," they ask, "heal this person here."

They ask for one meal at a time... "Multiply this bread," they say, "all these people are hungry and we don't know what to feed them."

These are some of the same questions we ask when we're searching for God in our own moments of panic. "Ok God, just this once, keep me safe, heal my loved one, help me get this promotion, get me out of this sticky situation and I promise I'll never do it again, I'll never take you for granted, I'll never forget that you showed up and saved me from what I know I deserve."

Of course, when it's not us, when it's Bruce Nolan or the crowd and disciples, it is easy for us to see that they are missing the point.

Yes, God so often does show up in those moments of crisis offering a sign, offering food, offering healing, ... offering grace.

But the bigger miracle, the more impressive sign, is the one that often goes unnoticed.

Who are you? Where can we find you? Give us a sign to show us that God has truly sent you. Give us a sign to show us that what you are saying is true!

These are the questions they bring to Jesus, and we sympathize with him as modern readers of the story because we know they are missing the biggest and brightest sign that is right there among them.

Jesus!

It's like the construction sign flashing: "Caution Ahead" that Bruce Nolan drives right by.

Jesus is right there, living, breathing, working among the people, tending to the needs of the crowds, offering them acceptance, compassion, relationship, inclusion, grace, and most of all... *love*... and all they can think to ask about is bread. Jesus is right there showing them how to make the bread and fill the cup, how to multiply the meal so that they, too, can feed the world with God's gift of love, but for whatever reason, they just don't see it yet.

Maybe they were waiting for Moses or Elijah – a familiar face from their past with a voice and style that they recognized from their traditions.

Maybe they expected the food to taste and look like manna and quail, after all, nobody really knows how expansive God's dinner menu is.

Maybe they were afraid of what it would mean if God really was breaking in through Jesus of Nazareth. The one who never quite showed up where one might expect, the one who didn't answer the questions exactly how they thought they'd be answered... Maybe the path of following this *sign* of God incarnate was a little more involved than they had once anticipated.

Maybe believing meant more than just an intellectual commitment. Maybe it meant eating the meal and then following in the footsteps of the one who set the table.

Maybe it meant seeing the sign and then being the sign rather than asking for further proof.

Maybe the sign was there all along, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, lighting the way.

