

Even though she has been in the back, watching it happen to others with wide eyes for several weeks in a row now, Sophia Margaret Admire has no idea what is about to happen to her. Her parents and godparents will smile and coo at her, but that's normal, she's used to charming them.

She will have water poured on her head and dance with the pastor and be the center of attention, but that just feels like bath time and a visit from grandma.

Church and music and smiling faces are all familiar to her, as typical in her short life experience as eating bread and fish were to those who chased Jesus across the lake.

But there is something remarkable and rare happening mysteriously in the midst of all this normalcy.

The loaves and fishes seemed to come from nowhere, and so did the odd, lovely feeling of real satisfaction after the meal.

The singing and splashing and sashaying around has something extra special within in it too this time, but if you ask Sophia what it is, she won't be able to articulate it any more than those satisfied seekers on the Galilean seashore.

Today Sophia enters the story of Jesus, prophet or potential king, miracle man or messiah, that enigmatic and irresistible figure we keep chasing after and finding in the strangest places.

Sophia has no idea yet what is going on or what it all means.  
She'll fit right in.

Today's gospel is a case study in what awaits Sophia and continues for us all.

When her parents and godparents promise to lead her into faith, to shepherd her growth in trust and understanding, they are promising to do what Jesus does with all of us who chase after him with questions he does not answer directly and hungers he knows better than we know ourselves.

They are promising, among other things, to guide her as she explores the sacred question at the center of Pentecost, the question on which Luther built his small catechism for children like Sophia and like me to learn and grow and discover: the question *What does this mean?*

It's the question to which Jesus keeps pushing the crowd that hunts him down and flocks around him to ask him something entirely else.

*Rabbi, when did you come here?*

The good rabbi, of course, doesn't tell them...he doesn't say anything about walking on water, strolling across the sea like God Almighty, like it ain't no thing.

What he does tell them is why they have come here, and why they haven't.

*Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.*

What Jesus was distributing on that hillside was more than supper; it was a sign, a pointer to the presence and power and providence and abundance and grace and generosity of God.

Jesus was dishing up a metaphor, a marker, an emblem of the reign of God where everyone is satisfied and there is more than enough and nothing is lost.

But all of that is lost on the crowd, and he knows it.

So, patiently, persistently, Jesus begins to break it down for them like bread.  
He continues to feed them, bite by bite, with the meaning of his miracle.

This, of course, is slower work than the first part, the physical feeding part, which is probably why there is so much overeating and obesity in our impatient country...when we feel the insatiable hunger in our souls, we quickly stuff the body with food that perishes.

We need the physical food, and there are too many of us who cannot access even that, so that is where we have to start, with one another and with ourselves.

That is where Jesus starts too; he doesn't make anyone in the starving crowds accept him into their hearts before passing the rolls; he doesn't spiritualize the sandwich.

But Jesus also keeps going.

When the crowds follow after him, he knows they will allow themselves to remain content with the staples, with bread and fish and mechanical miracle explanations like *how did you do it* and *rabbi, when did you come here?*

Jesus desires much more for them, and for us.

So instead of answering our questions directly, he redirects us.

As Sophia's parents and godparents will learn, this takes a while.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus sticks with it, and sticks with us.

This bread of life conversation will continue for several verses, and for several weeks in our gospel readings.

In today's reading alone, look at how awkward the exchange is, how many more misunderstandings and rabbi's redirections there are.

It was not Moses then...it is God, now.

It is no longer manna...but a Son of Man.

It is not food you are looking for, but m...not perishables but a person, who after perishing will rise to eternal life.

And there is that misunderstanding and redirection at the very beginning of the conversation that is so telling for us at this very beginning of Sophia's baptismal covenant.

Jesus says, *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*

The crowd asks, *What must we do to perform the works of God?*

Do you see how quickly we grasp for control?

Do you see how inclined we are to turn baptism into something we decide rather than God's gracious choice, how bent we are on grabbing God's steering wheel?

We don't want to be given anything, we want to earn it and control it and decide how and when and to whom to distribute it.

The feeding of the crowds disturbs us because there is no application process, no line, no forms, no exchange of money, no demonstration of need or proof of identification required.

The work of God is sloppily generous and wide open to exploitation and abuse; it leads to chaos, and to the cross.

*What must we do to perform the works of God, so that they can be done on our timetable and on our terms?*

And Jesus answers, Trust me.

*Believe in him whom [God] has sent.*

Believing is not forcing your brain to sign off on strange, impossible things; it's not that easy.

Believing is leading your heart to sign away the control and to trust that God knows what God is doing, whether it is with mysterious manna or a mysterious messiah or with some other blessing that leaves us scratching our heads and wondering *what is it* and how? That is hard work; it's always easier to learn the ropes and grab the reins than it is to let go. It's far easier to be responsible than to believe. Our congregation's ongoing, unfolding vision discernment process will be a sturdy test for us this year; will we be able to be led from our questions and concerns toward whatever Jesus' agenda is for us?

Perhaps we all need to spend more time learning from Sophia.

She relies totally and helplessly on the good graces and kindness of her parents. Her only work is to believe in them, to trust them to feed her, to give her this bread always, and she does it well.

Maybe she does know what's going on after all, better than we do.

Rabbi Sophia, thank God that you have come here.