

A new kind of king: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; John 6:1-21

by [Daniel Harrell](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

I appreciate the lectionary's knack for relating Old and New Testament texts, but I have no idea why King David's adultery with Bathsheba is coupled with Jesus feeding the 5,000 and walking on water. Perhaps the intent is to contrast the bad behavior of David with the admirable acts of the Son of David. King David not only absconded with another man's wife—he had the husband killed too. Jesus, on the other hand, took a boy's lunch and multiplied it to feed a multitude. Maybe the idea is to retrace Jesus' ancestry. For those who believe that their own bad behavior is beyond the reach of grace, being reminded that Jesus redeemed some pretty rotten branches on his own family tree offers hope. Or perhaps the point is to discourage us from thinking that what we really need is a strong political leader. King David was powerful, but he never walked on water.

John's rendition of the feeding of the 5,000 is basically the same as Mark's, but John talks more about Jesus' motivation. Facing a voracious crowd after a long sermon, Jesus asked his disciple Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" John then adds, "Jesus said this to test him." Apparently Philip failed the test; Jesus' question freaked him out. Peter rounded up the five loaves and two fish. Jesus took it all in stride, receiving the meager lunch and transforming it into a heavenly banquet with leftovers to boot. I've always wondered about the mechanics. Did each loaf regenerate every time somebody pulled off a piece? Or did the two loaves morph into two giant, monster baguettes? Did Jesus keep pulling food out of a basket like so many rabbits out of a hat? John doesn't say.

John does say the crowd concluded that Jesus must be "the prophet to come," which alludes to a promise God made to Moses about raising up his replacement (Deut. 18:18). Overjoyed that the prophet-to-come *had* come, the people were about to "take him by force to make him king." (Is this the lectionary connection? Are we to see the people trying to forcefully misuse the authority of the king for their own pleasure as David did?) Jesus, aware of their intentions, eluded the grip of his admirers—something he often does in the Gospels.

His concern was like one faced by the wildly popular rock band U2, which tried recently to slip into the cozy confines of the Somerville Theater near Boston. U2 tried to keep its plan a secret, but city blocks surrounding the theater swarmed with fans. Jesus' celebrity in his day makes Bono look like *American Idol* season-five winner Taylor Hicks. Jesus wanted to slip into the world to save it uncharacteristically by way of a cross, so he had to keep his plan a secret. Had word got out that Jesus really was the celebrity savior everybody wanted, they would never have let him be the suffering Savior they needed.

Jesus was a king all right, but he would establish his kingdom not by wielding military might or political power but by surrendering might and yielding to power. He would overturn injustice by succumbing to it. He would expose the futility of violence by suffering its cruelty. He would win victory by being defeated. He would take away sin by taking it on. He would redeem death by dying.

Why not the superstar way? Bono raises awareness and money to fight world poverty and disease. *American Idol* sponsors the charitable campaign Idol Gives Back. What's wrong with fame? Why not use rock-star celebrity for good? Because superstardom has a serious dark side. For Jesus, the dark side was that of evasion: giving in to the fame and thereby going around the cross. "How can I die when the people need me? Wouldn't it be better to stay and make their lives better now? Why not establish a kingdom and be the king here? Israel is oppressed. Rome is the oppressor. There's a whole lot of good that needs doing now. The people love me." Yet as Jesus makes clear throughout the Gospels, the kingdom of God exists for more than the temporal bounds of this world. It transcends time and death to encompass eternity. For eternal life to happen, somebody had to deal with the darkness of human evil and sin, which meant Jesus had to sacrifice his very life for it—something that superstars don't do.

Jesus escaped to a mountain and didn't reemerge until late that night, walking on water. You'd think that if Jesus were trying to quell expectations of his being a superstar, the last thing he would do is walk on water. Granted, John says the disciples were terrified by it. Maybe they finally understood. Jesus was king, but he was nothing like King David.