

August 6, Ordinary 18A (Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Matthew 14:13-21)

## **I can't fathom a God who isn't personal—and personally accountable.**

by [Maria Mallory White](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

Our God is imminently immanent. That's what strikes me as I read the lectionary passages for this week. They spell out or allude to the realities of human struggle and conflict in this journey of faith we call life. And they reveal God as Immanuel, as with us.

These texts also point me to the rich theological mother wit of my ancestors. In my tradition, the senior saints—the plainspoken believers of my grandparents' generation—often gave testimony of a God who “sits high and looks low.” If that vantage point sounds cosmically distant, think again. This sittin'-high, lookin'-low God “always comes to see about his children,” as the senior saints would say. It's a characterization of the promised immanence of God, of God's love and justice that secure God's children and instructs them in the way to live. This is also a God who “may not come when you want him, but he'll be there right on time.”

This week's psalm underscores why: this covenant God is devoted to God's children. Gracious, merciful, good, just, giving, and near—Psalm 145 proclaims the reality of a God who is on our side, who favors us, and whom we love and obey in grateful response. This is the God about whom I heard my people testify in the words of Doris Akers's song:

You can't beat God giving,  
No matter how you try!  
The more you give, the more he gives to you.  
Just keep on giving, because it's really true.

This is a God of lavish, ravishing blessings that cannot be diminished or depleted.

The Isaiah text amplifies God's covenant commitment to God's people. This God is familiar—to me, to my family, to the congregations I've been part of and have served. It's a God you can count on, a God whose covenant we know through song: God will always "make a way out of no way," always "open doors no man can shut." God's love and grace are so freely given that one song offers this image: "Jesus is on the main line. / Tell Him what you want."

I was brought up in this church context and still live in it. I simply cannot fathom a God who isn't personal—and personally accountable. So to my ears, the lectionary choices this week are meant to tease out that truth. One of the claims we make as Christians—one that particularly alienates nonbelievers—is that we know God. The real God, the only God, known uniquely through Jesus.

But in our Matthew text we see Jesus demonstrating that we should not only know God—not only know God's transcendent and historic commitment—but also expect and faithfully depend on God's love to deliver real-time blessings. That's why I grew up in church hearing folks say, "You can't just talk the talk. You gotta walk the walk." Here the seasoned saints would say, "God did not bless you to sit around on your 'blessed assurance!'"

When my husband and I traveled to Ghana in 2015, we met children living in what to us was mind-blowing poverty. In a skit they performed for us, they confronted us—visiting missionaries bearing Bibles—with a profound reality check: "We need water." In other words, to again quote the senior saints, believers must never be "so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good." Jesus' grace is never merely spiritual; it is also practical—that's at the heart of the faith we know, live, and celebrate. So much so that when worship gets really good, and the memories of God's incarnate goodness start to overflow, we've been known to dance ecstatically and proclaim,

When I think about Jesus, and what he's done for me,  
When I think about Jesus, and how he set me free,  
I can dance, dance, dance . . . all night!"

The feeding of the 5,000 appears in all four Gospels, and it remains a crowd favorite today. I've heard plenty of preachers talk about how the Lord took "a few fish sandwiches" and fed the multitude.

But I noticed something in this passage this week, something that hadn't made a strong impression before. I saw that the bread itself is the star of the show. I saw Jesus demonstrating his imminently immanent ability to meet human need through real-time supernatural power. I saw the teacher who commands, "You give them something to eat"—and then does just that, educating the disciples in the eternal resources at hand in his kingdom. I saw Jesus compassionately providing for the needy around him even as he mourns the murder of his cousin John. I saw him filled with grace to heal and to provide daily bread. I heard the echo of the manna in the wilderness, the figure of his own death as the bread of heaven broken and multiplied through the sharing among those who follow him.

In all this, I was strengthened and renewed. And I couldn't help but hear a refrain of my past ringing in my heart: "It is no secret what God can do. / What he's done for others, he'll do for you."