

I am called Aman. At least that is what I call myself now. When he first came to Capernaum I was called by my given name, Abaddon. In Hebrew it means destruction. Thanks, dad.

None of us saw him arrive here, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Actually word of him and his deeds preceded the man himself. We heard amazing things. We heard that he had great power. We heard that the power of healing was in his touch. We heard that the blind now see, and the lame now dance. We heard these things and we were filled with hope. In fact some of our community crossed the sea to find him and see for themselves. Those who found him returned with a strange tale that filled us with more than hope. They told us that a huge crowd – thousands of people who were following him – was fed by him with just a few loaves of barley and a couple of fish. And before we had a chance to cross the sea and find him for ourselves he was suddenly with us in our town of Capernaum. He had somehow crossed this sea without a boat. Miraculously he had arrived in our midst. We all were saying the same thing: Moses had returned. Don't you see? The Bread, the Feeding, the Crossing of the Sea. Moses had returned and was with us.

Now you have to understand how badly we wanted and needed another Moses. Our land was not ours, nor had it been for some time. We needed someone – the anointed one – to come and free us from the bonds of Rome's tyranny, someone to lead us back to ourselves, children of a promise. That was what we were looking for, that was what we were crossing a sea to find, that was what we were praying for. A New Moses.

Instead we got Jesus... from... Nazareth – what, maybe 20 miles from here? – son of Joseph, a carpenter's son. We couldn't believe that THIS was the one we had heard about, that this was the New Moses. I couldn't believe it... until he spoke. When we asked him about the feeding, and about the crossing – we just had to know – he did not speak as Moses. This Jesus spoke as none had before, at least to my knowledge. There were many false prophets, many self-proclaimed messiahs roaming around. But this man was different. He carried himself in such a way that you just knew there was nothing false about him. He spoke in riddles, riddles that have taken me years since to try to unravel, riddles that have proven to be undeniable truth.

He did not speak as Moses. He spoke of Moses. He spoke as one beyond Moses. He spoke of that ancient generation of Moses who died in the wilderness without seeing promise. He spoke of their bread from heaven – the manna – that fed that fatal generation, a bread that sustained them for just a season of 40 years. He spoke of another bread, the Bread of Life, that will sustain us forever, so that we may not die. And then he said he was that bread.

At this news I snuck a peak to my left and to my right. They all shared the same look: expectation giving way to bewilderment giving way to pain and disappointment as our hope for a New Moses drained. We wanted freedom so badly. We wanted to be free of tyranny. We wanted to be free of Rome and all other conquerors of promise. We wanted to know we were still God's beloved children, and not forsaken. Can you know how badly we wanted that knowledge?

Jesus said that he was the Bread of Life. That he was food, that his flesh was ours to eat. He said that God dwelt in him, and Jesus dwelt in God, and that if we somehow "consume" him we too will abide in him and have everlasting life. I know it sounds crazy, but that is what the man said. I looked again to my left and to my right. Disappointment was giving way to outrage and anger. Many hurled insults at him. Many turned on their heels and left in disgust. Many argued amongst themselves, trying to find a sliver of hope to still hang on to. As for me, Abaddon – destruction – I was transfixed. I couldn't move. The crowd swirled around me in their skepticism and frank outrage. But there was something about HIM that held me and gave

credence to the last words I remember him saying to the storming crowd, words that have never left me: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” I knew in this man that there was spirit and life.

The moment, the event of my life, came as that storm of outrage swirled about him. So many who had been fed, who believed in Jesus as the one who would save them, were turning their backs upon him. So many of his faithful were returning to the “old way” because this was not what they had hoped for. And in the midst of this chaos Jesus turned and addressed his twelve original followers, his disciples, asking them, “Do you also wish to go away?” What a question! He was really asking them, “Who do you think I am?” More, he was asking them to consider themselves, their discipleship, to consider what drew them to follow him. More than asking them, “Who do you think I am?” he was asking them, “Who are you?” “Do you also wish to go away?” And Simon Peter simply spoke the truth, “Where else could we go? In you is life” “Where else could we go? In you is life.” Simon Peter spoke my heart in that instant, he spoke my soul, my very being. I did not have words. I could not have made a persuasive argument, or given a rational discourse for not dispersing with the crowd. After Peter’s words all I could do was to just put one foot in front of the other and follow Jesus and his few remaining disciples out of Capernaum. In that moment I no longer called myself Abaddon; I became Aman – which means “to hold or be held,” like a parent holds a child.

I followed Jesus to his end and beyond. I witnessed great signs and miracles. I heard words of instruction, and parables that I still ponder. Mostly I heard him speak of love. At the end I saw him surrender into that love, entering into Jerusalem with the sure knowledge that he would be arrested and executed. And he was, on that terrible hill, on that terrible cross. I almost changed my name back on that day. But I did not, and in so choosing became more deeply Aman. And then there came the empty tomb, and much more to consider ever since. He could have been king – he could have been Moses – at any moment. We know that now; he had that power. But Jesus continued to exercise perfect freedom, the freedom to enter into pain and suffering and death, and defeat those things with love.

There are moments in our lives where everything shifts, and we find ourselves spinning around a new center. That day in Capernaum was my new axis. Once you know love, THAT kind of love Jesus embodies, you don’t see the world the same way. On that day in Capernaum I, along with those thousands of people, thought that what we needed to live was freedom – a particular kind of freedom, freedom from the tyranny of Rome. Jesus did not offer that. He gave us another kind of freedom, the freedom to choose him, the freedom to choose God, and in so choosing to become free from the tyranny of ourselves, the tyranny of hatred, the tyranny of destruction. He gave us the freedom to follow love. And he gave us the freedom to choose him at the moment when we were most filled with anger and dark disappointment.

I have thought a great deal about that ever since. Since that axial day so many years ago I have known great loss. I have seen the brutality of tyranny continue to bruise our people. I have turned against my neighbors, and they against me, striving for what is not ours to possess. I have buried those I love dearly, some too suddenly and too soon. I have burned with anger at Rome, anger at my neighbor, anger at God. I have known the darkness of deepest night, and have felt the anguished cry of “Why?” on my lips. And in those moments grace transports me to that place in Capernaum. And Jesus turns to me once again in my darkness and asks me, “Do you also wish to go away?” And now, with the knowledge of the cross, with the cry from his lips for deliverance echoing in my ears, with the knowledge of his tomb – both filled and emptied – I know my answer. I know that he did not come to explain away the pain of our world. I know that

he did not come to say to us that we are getting what we deserve, that our sorrows and our loss and our bondage is God's vengeance on us. I know that he came not to blame or vanquish but to love. He came not to spare us from the world's pain but to guide us through death and destruction by entering it first himself, and overcoming all darkness with a power that is only God's to wield. In the depths of darkness Jesus asks his question and I am reminded that God remains our loving creator in spite of our world's destructive tendencies. I am reminded that I am beloved and not forsaken. I am reminded that I am Aman, in my Father's arms.

And so reminded, I turn – yet again – and say, “Where else would I go? Only you, Jesus, have life.”