

“Bread from Heaven”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 • Psalm 78:23-29 • Ephesians 4:1-16 • John 6:24-35

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August 4, 2024

11th Sunday after Pentecost

We talked about food last week, and we’re going to talk about food again this week. Last week we heard about God feeding people who are hungry *in body* ... today we’re going to hear about God feeding people who are hungry *in soul*. Last week there were parallel stories in the Old Testament and the New Testament – one featuring Elisha and the other featuring Jesus ... this week there are once again parallel stories in both Testaments – one featuring Moses and the other featuring ... well, you know.

The backdrop for today’s Old Testament story is the Israelite’s escape from Egypt, about a dozen centuries before Jesus. God gave them a truly miraculous victory over their Egyptian pursuers, and they are now in the desert wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. And ... they are hungry. So hungry that they wish they had died back in Egypt. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” It’s amazing how quickly people can go from being jubilant and joyful, giving thanks to God with all their heart for all the wonderful things God has done for them, to being bitter and angry, complaining that God has abandoned them.

But God *hasn’t* abandoned them. God *never* abandons those whom God loves. Not even then they are ungrateful. God heard their cries for help when they were suffering under the bitter yoke of slavery; God hears their cries again now. God tells Moses: “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.” God is literally going to *give them their daily bread*: bread for one day, and one day only, and they are to consume that bread on that day, and that day alone. God will do the same thing the next day, and the day after that; each day giving the Israelites exactly what they need for just one day. On the sixth day, God will give double, enough for two days, which is again exactly what they need, for God will provide no bread on the seventh day, so the people can rest. If they try to store up extra, it will go bad. The next morning, the Israelites woke to a layer of fresh dew, and underneath the dew was “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.” They had never seen such a thing before, so they wondered, “What is it?” In Hebrew, “What is it?” are the words *man hu* – which is where the word *manna* comes from. “What is it?” *Man hu?* Manna!

So that was their bread, their daily bread, their “bread from heaven.” God also gave them meat: a flock of quails that “covered the camp.” Carbohydrates and protein; sustenance to live on.

Except – didn’t I say a few minutes ago that the stories today aren’t so much about God feeding people who are hungry *in body* as they are about God feeding people who are hungry *in soul*? Didn’t

this story start out with the people complaining that they are *hungry*? *Physically* hungry? Yes, yes it did. But here's the thing: God *could* have just given them food. God *could* have just satisfied their *physical* hunger. But God did more than that. God also gave them a *challenge*. A *spiritual* challenge. All those instructions about gathering enough for one day, and *only* one day – that was a *spiritual test*. “In that way I will test them,” God says, “whether they will follow my instruction or not.” God wants to know if these people are able to listen to *instructions*. God wants to know whether they can maintain a *discipline*. God wants to know whether they are just interested in *eating* – or if they're truly willing to *follow the Word of the Lord*. We didn't see that element in the stories last week. In both those stories – Elisha feeding a hundred people during a famine; Jesus feeding the five thousand – there was no challenge, there was no spiritual test. There was just *food*, a free gift from God. Here, there's food, but there are also *expectations*. Instructions. Will the people *listen*? Will they *follow the Word of the Lord*?

Bear those questions in mind as we turn to the Gospel passage. The day after Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, a whole crowd of people is looking for him. They had lost track of Jesus and his disciples during the night; he was not where they expected him to be. When they finally catch up to him, they ask: “Rabbi, when did you come here?” They are addressing him as if he is just a man. They call him “Rabbi,” not “Lord.” They want to know *when he arrived*, but really the question they *should* be asking is *where did he come from in the first place*. He came from *heaven*. He came from *God*. They aren't seeing that. Jesus can tell. “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” That is, *you're looking for me because you hope I will give you some more physical food, like I did yesterday*. But what Jesus has to offer is far more – *far* more – than mere *physical* food. He continues: “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. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Jesus can provide people with *physical* food. But the reason he came to this earth was to provide us with *spiritual* food, what he calls “the food that endures for eternal life.” The *physical* food he provided the day before really had only one purpose: *to display his power* – so that people would seek the *deeper* food, the *spiritual* food, that he *alone* can provide.

But the crowd isn't getting it. They ask: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” They want to know what they should *do*. It's the wrong question. Jesus has just been telling them, *Look, I can feed you with the food that endures for eternal life*. Jesus is talking about *himself*, and what *he* can do, but the crowd wants to talk about what they hope *they* can do. They are focused too much on *themselves*, and far too little on *Jesus*. So Jesus makes it plain and simple: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” He's saying, *Look, folks, stop focusing on YOU and start focusing on ME*. Then they ask: “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” *Hello!!!* Come on, crowd! They were *there*, the day before, when he fed *five thousand of you* with five loaves of bread and two fish – and now they have the audacity to ask for a sign? Didn't they notice the one he did yesterday? Or were they so focused on their own physical comfort and well-being that they failed to take note of the generous Host who provided that meal!?

The people in the crowd continue: “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Yes, yes indeed, that is true. God did give the Israelites bread from heaven to eat. *And Jesus is doing the same for that crowd*. Jesus replies: “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life

to the world.” Think about that. *The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.* When God fed the Israelites manna in the wilderness, it came down from heaven and gave life to the world. But now there is a *new* bread from heaven, a *different* bread from heaven. What is this *new* “bread of God” that “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”? You know. Surely, you know. *Jesus! Jesus* is the “bread of God” that “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”! Not *physical bread* ... but *spiritual* bread. Or, if you will, not physical bread, but *metaphysical* bread.

The people in the crowd are beginning to catch on. “They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’” It’s a request, and it’s almost *exactly the same* request that the Samaritan woman at the well had asked of Jesus two chapters earlier. She had been talking about *water*, water that you drink; and Jesus was talking about *living water*, the water of life that comes from him; and when she starts to catch on, she says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Here, the crowd says, “Sir, give us this bread always.” She was thirsty, *spiritually* thirsty, even if she hadn’t realized that until her conversation with Jesus; likewise, these people are hungry, *spiritually* hungry, even if they haven’t realized it until their conversation with Jesus. He can nourish people the way no one else can. Why? Because, as he puts it, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He is the bread of life, the true bread from heaven, the manna in the wilderness – the wilderness that is called *life* in this broken world.

What I’m trying to say – what I think these passages are trying to say – is this: there is food ... and there is *Food*. There is bread ... and there is *Bread*. We all need food, we all need our daily bread; *physical* nourishment for the living of this life. *But we also need so much more.* If our focus is on our *physical* needs, we are missing something very, *very* important. For we also have a *spiritual* life. The Israelites in the wilderness and the crowd around Jesus had this in common: they were both focused on their *physical* needs. Both groups were neglecting their *spiritual* lives. In both stories, God challenges them to look *beyond*. God does it with the Israelites with that manna six days a week; Jesus does it with the crowd with those deep answers to their shallow questions. And us ... God does it with *us* as well, though our encounter with these scripture passages, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our soul.

Which brings us to the most important question: *what do you do to feed your soul?* Seriously. *What do you do that nourishes your soul?* You’re here in church; that’s a start. But what *else* do you do? *What helps you connect with the Spirit of the Divine on Mondays, and on Tuesdays, and on Wednesdays, and on Thursdays, and on Fridays, and on Saturdays?* What *truly* nourishes you with the Bread of Life? Maybe you read a devotional. Is it working for you? Is it *helping you grow*? If it’s not challenging you – *ditch it!* A lot of contemporary Christian writings aren’t very deep. But there’s also some really *rich* stuff out there. Sometimes you need to look around. Try something new. I’ve changed my devotional practices several times over the years when I reached a plateau and I felt like I wasn’t *growing* any more.

One more thing. There’s a table spread before us this morning. A table with bread; a table with the fruit of the vine. This is, of course, food. We will eat the bread; we will drink from the cup. But it’s *more* than just food. Some Christian traditions say that this sacred meal *becomes* Christ’s actual body and blood. Other traditions say it’s symbolic. Our tradition stands in between. This meal is *more* than a symbol. It’s a *sign* of Christ’s life given for us. It’s a *seal* of Christ’s ongoing love and mercy for us. It’s a *means* by which we experience the *magnificent grace of God*. Come, my friends. Come to the *feast!*

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