

I AM: the Bread of Life

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, the author of our salvation. Amen.

Jesus says: “I AM the bread of life.” Bread was one of the most pervasive foods available. It took a certain amount of stability to produce. You couldn’t produce it in a completely nomadic context; you had to have the fields to tend; but once you had the land, growing the grain for bread would yield a harvest faster than, say, cultivating a vineyard or fruit trees.

Belief is a key theme in the Gospel of John. In our scripture passage for this morning, Jesus tells the people, “you have seen me and do not believe,” and it’s the antithesis of what Jesus tells Thomas near the end of the gospel: “blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believe.”

“I will never drive anyone away,” says Jesus. Christ calls all to just and equitable life, and it seems to me that the church should perceive that as part of their mission as well. Is there anyone we are driving away from church? How can we reach out to them? One of my professors at school has written a lot about getting communion to those who can no longer physically come to church. He was writing this before the pandemic, thinking mainly of our more elderly siblings in Christ, but nowadays, it has great implications for all of us. He wrote that when we are blessed to be able to take communion together, we should always be looking around and trying to see who is not there so we can extend the table to them, because everyone needs the bread of heaven, and if they can’t physically participate in the eucharist, maybe each one of you can be the body of Christ in their lives by a card or a phone call or a prayer.

My professor is a smart person, he also has some idiosyncratic ideas. He has this proposal that it would be proper and fitting for entire congregations to start wearing albs. Do you know albs? They're a kind of robe historically associated with baptism, and my professor suggests that not just clergy people, or choirs, but whole congregations could start wearing them for worship as a reminder of their covenant to God and each other. Some of his colleagues debate him on this matter. What if you forgot? What if someone didn't know? Can you imagine showing up to church one Sunday and seeing that every single person is wearing an alb but you? You would think, "oh, man, what email did I miss?" All worship communities have their own personalities, and we can see that in this passage, the way the church elders react to Jesus.

"Isn't this Mary and Joseph's youngster? He's not come down from heaven! We've known him since he was young!" This is classic Johannine misunderstanding; it's a humorous thread woven throughout this gospel. Phillip says to Nathanael "come and see this prophet I've found, Jesus of Nazareth!" and Nathanael says, "Does anything good come from Nazareth?" Jesus says to Nicodemus "you must be born again" and Nicodemus says, "how can people be born again?" (They get too big as they grow up) and Jesus says, "not literally, you must be born of the Spirit." In Samaria, the disciples go into a town and get some food. When they offer some to Jesus he says "I have food to eat that you do not know of" and the disciples say "...do you think someone came and gave him food while we were gone?"

You can try this in your personal scripture studies, if you would like. Start reading through the Gospel of John and make a note every time there's a comedic misunderstanding. Because the Scriptures are some of the weightiest philosophical and ethical texts ever written, but they are also funny and full of life.

The people murmur, just as they did in Exodus. You remember the story. It has happened, the people have been freed, but as they look around the wilderness they begin to have doubts. The oppressor's boot on their necks in Egypt was unbearable, but now, in order to be free from the empire's tyranny and abuse they have also divested themselves of all existing social systems. If there isn't a market, if you don't have fields, how will you eat? They begin to murmur against Moses and also against God, and God says "I did not liberate you only to forsake you. I will be with you." God sends manna, a thin coating of solid food on the ground every morning for decades until the people enter the land flowing with milk and honey. Manna, it's a potential wordplay on the Hebrew word for what: "Ma?" What is this ubiquitous and miraculous stuff too great to be comprehended? Jesus is the new manna. The bread of life, not a life of oppression, but a life of abundant freedom, justice, and righteousness.

"...and anyone sent by the Father to me I will raise up..." people don't tend to expect God to act in new ways, but Lent is the observance that God does: a season of change. In the early Church, Lent was a time of preparation for Baptism, a change of your role in the church family. It is also a season of repentance, and John Wesley described repentance as inward change. Everyone shall be taught by God. The Manna was a teaching moment. It was ephemeral, the more people tried to store it up, the faster it would slip away from them. They had to take only what they needed then. "Give us this day our daily bread." God was dwelling in relationship with the people. God said "I will be with you every morning! Don't try to hoard the gift as though you think I'm just going to up and abandon you next Tuesday. I Am God. I am not going anywhere. In fact, I am going to come closer."

Because Jesus is the incarnation of God dwelling among us; the Word become Flesh; abundant life for those who believe. The Bread of Life.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.