

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 2 August 2009

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

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

“So mortals ate the bread of angels; he provided for them food enough.” Those inspiring lines from today’s Psalm help to lead us into four weeks of considering the idea of Bread from Heaven, specifically of Jesus as the Bread of Life. It is very rare for us to have such a series in our lectionary. This allows a greater depth and breadth of exploration than is possible in a single service. I am preaching today and in two weeks. Next week will bring Deacon Mimi’s reflection on Saturday and Father Jack on Sunday. Then Mother Shana will conclude with the fourth Sunday. An opportunity to look at this idea from a nice variety of perspectives. Which is a good thing. We see in the Gospel of John, which give us these readings, that from the beginning this was a challenging idea, that people actually left Jesus’ band of followers because of what they called a “difficult teaching”. So it bears thoughtful examination.

Beginning with the Exodus narrative about Manna in the wilderness reminds us that the idea of Bread from Heaven, of God providing unexpected nourishment for our difficult life journeys, goes back thousands of years to our beginnings as people of God. Jesus clearly understood himself in terms of the Manna in the wilderness – and he seems to have felt that his followers’ familiarity with the Manna tradition might help them understand his role in their lives.

So what is happening in that story? After generations of prosperity, the Israelites have been enslaved by a paranoid Pharaoh, who fears them as aliens living in his land. By the hand of Moses, God liberates the people and leads them out into the wilderness of Sinai.

Here they are no longer slaves, forced to do hard labor – but they have lost the luxury of Egypt’s abundant food. They whine ceaselessly. “Why did you bring us out here to die of starvation?” It must have been so frustrating to be Moses, seeing the great future that God was calling people to – and their total failure to appreciate it.

Jesus reminds us of this story, reminds us that God is always calling us out of our comfort and ease into some new adventure, which we are unlikely to fully understand. This was certainly the case with Jesus’ followers. Last week we remembered how Jesus called James and John away from their father Zebedee’s fishing boat, away from everything they had ever known, into some new kind of life they could not quite comprehend, invited them to be sons of the Voice of God. Throughout the Gospels, James and John and Peter and the others persist in misunderstanding and often whining, just like the Israelites in the wilderness.

This is our life as people of God. But the good news is that wherever our unexpected journeys may take us, God is always there, offering us 'Bread from Heaven'. No matter how desolate the wilderness, the Israelites always had food enough and water enough – so will we.

In today's Gospel, Jesus chides the people for being distracted by the literal physical food. "You only follow me because you liked eating the loaves. But that is not the important food." The feeding of the 5000, Jesus seems to say, is not the point. It is merely a metaphor, a stopgap, just like the Manna in the wilderness. It meets the temporary need of bodily nourishment for the moment – but Jesus did not come to multiply loaves and fishes day after day.

Jesus came to give us the food that endures unto eternal life and that is Himself.

What does this mean?

We have had some great conversations at the Thursday Bible study about how confusing it must have been for those first followers to have Jesus say that he is their food, that they must eat his flesh, that he is the bread God is offering to them. If we take a step back and hear those familiar words as if for the first time, it is easy to see how shocking – and confusing – they are.

It was hard enough to accept that God dropped edible food with the morning dew of the Sinai, but how much harder to think of eating the person you are devoted to. No wonder the Church gives us four weeks to digest the sixth chapter of John. This takes some thinking, some exploring, some experience.

This is not an easy thing, just as it was not easy for the ancient people in the wilderness. We are not used to any sort of 'bread from heaven'. Jesus tries to help people see beyond their stomachs, beyond their immediate physical needs, but this is a long process.

We often read and hear people speaking of spiritual hunger, something that is a vivid experience for people in and out of the Church – real to us now, real to Jesus' contemporaries, real to the Israelites in the wilderness. Spiritual hunger is a reality for people who have no connection to God, but also to people like us, like Jesus' disciples, like the people with Moses, people who are doing our best to follow the calling to be faithful followers of God. We all experience this hunger – and so Jesus has taught us to include in our daily prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Neediness is a fact of spiritual life. But nourishment from God conquers this neediness.

This idea is so important that the same line both ends this week's gospel and begins next week's: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Following God can lead to places of apparent desolation, whether it is standing up for the poor and oppressed, or expressing an unpopular view, or simply stepping out on an unexpected adventure. We can feel very alone and hungry. Then we need to remember how God responded to the whining of the Israelites. Of course, the Israelites did not at first recognize the Manna, the strange white film left after the dew dried, as food – sometimes we need Moses to tell us, to help us see what God has given us for nourishment.

“Bread for the Journey” – that is what we are promised. So we are left with questions: What is the journey we are called to? And how do we recognize our bread?

As followers of Christ we understand our journey Godward to be one that we share, but still it is different for each of us. The richness of our calendar these two weeks reminds us of how different our journeys can be even among steadfast members of the Body of Christ. On Wednesday we celebrated Mary and Martha of Bethany, those two devoted sisters whose ways of faithfulness were so different from one another that they have become symbols for divergent spiritual styles. We remembered William Wilberforce with his tireless and ultimately successful struggle to banish slavery from the British Empire. John Mason Neale, who is our Saint of the Week this week, whose journey led through persecution and calumny, left the church with a treasure trove of hymnody, beautiful texts we still love to sing. And these are not all. Each journey different. Each following God’s call. Each with its own loneliness and its own gifts. And for each journey, God provided bread enough.

One way to find signposts for our own journeys, as well as clues to recognize the bread that God is offering, is to read the inspiring tales of the saints who have gone before us.

In this week’s *Journey with Jesus*, Daniel Clendenin reminded me of some words of the famous French mathematician Blaise Pascal about spiritual hunger, "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself" (*Pensees* 148/428)

God is our Bread. Jesus is the Bread of Life. Nothing else is. Nothing we put in place of God can satisfy us. Nothing we find for ourselves will give us strength for our life’s journeys. The Manna is there for us if we look for it carefully each day. Christ is here every time we gather in his Name, every time we present his life and death for us in the bread and wine.

God tells us, “My grace is sufficient for you. There is bread enough for your journey.”

That journey may lead us far from friends, as the Lymers are finding in their return to Indiana to see what new adventure God has in store. We know that whatever is coming, their journeys are leading them

toward the Kingdom, that we will always be fellow pilgrims, and that God himself will see that they have the bread they need.

Similarly our journey as a church can lead us in unexpected directions. Since the end of General Convention, the Archbishop of Canterbury has offered a vision of a future of separate but connected paths which has aroused considerable consternation. We do not know what we will find as a Communion, as the Episcopal Church, as a Diocese seeking a new Bishop, as a parish. We do not know what adventures await us.

But we do know that all our paths lead home to God, that our hunger is to be at home with God, and that God himself has come to us in Christ to be what we need.

So we walk the labyrinth, seeking the center; we come to Taizé listening for the voice of God, watching for the light; we come to the Eucharist, knowing that Christ is here to feed us.

We take hands as pilgrims together, supporting one another, and helping one another find the food that is offered. So we shall eat the bread of angels; as God provides for us food enough. Amen.