



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Bread from Heaven

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Then Jesus said to them, "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." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:32-35).

When you read the Bible all the way through, as some of us did last year, you get the big picture, a sense of the overall themes: The world and all that is in it, including us, was made by God and belongs to God. God gave us rules to live by, the Ten Commandments and other principles; but we have a tendency to mess things up, personally in our own lives and socially in our life together, so God raises up prophets from time to time to remind us what God wants. But still, we're not very good at doing what's right, so then, in the fullness of time, God himself takes on human nature and becomes like us in Jesus Christ so that, if we live in Christ, we can become more like him. Meanwhile, the world goes on, and one by one we pass away from this life into the kingdom of heaven, until that great day when God will make a new heaven and a new earth, where all God's people will live in righteousness and wholeness and peace forever and ever.

That's the big picture, the plot summary of the Bible. It's like zooming out on Google Earth to see the lay of the entire land. But another way to read the Bible is to zoom in tight and focus on a single text, or a particular image, and meditate on that image to see how the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a much deeper way. This morning, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper, I'd like to invite you to focus on an image that comes first from the Old Testament and then

gets taken up by Jesus in the New. It's the image of bread, which is to say, an image of what it is that sustains our life.

It begins with the Exodus. The people of Israel have been slaves in Egypt for a long time, and they cry out from under the yoke of suffering, until God hears their cry, and plans to deliver them. God calls Moses to go down to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery into a new land, a promised land where they can be free and manage their own affairs. But for various reasons, a trip that might have taken just a few weeks turns out to take 40 years. When the people catch on to their situation, and see how vulnerable they are, they complain bitterly that Moses has brought them out to the wilderness to die. People have short memories, and after a while even slavery starts to look good to them. At least there was food back in Egypt. So on the way to the very freedom they cried out for, people complain about the long and scary road to get there.

And that's when the manna comes. God hears the people's complaining, and God tells Moses there will be bread from heaven, fresh like the dew every morning. This strange stuff appears on the ground – the Hebrews call it "manna," which means "What is it?" – and you can make a kind of bread out of it, and it will give you all the strength you need. You only get enough for one day at a time, but the truth is, you only need one day's worth of bread at a time, and if it comes every day, you can walk as far as you need to go, all the way to the promised land.

Twelve or thirteen hundred years later, Jesus comes along, and this story of the Exodus is central to his people's identity. So when Jesus begins to teach in the synagogue, and does some amazing things in the form of healing and other miracles, his followers figure he's really close to God,

and they ask him how to pray. He tells them, among other things, to say to God, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Not huge stockpiles of bread. Not a freezer full of bread so that you’ll learn to rely on your freezer, but daily bread, so that every day, like your ancestors in the wilderness, you’ll learn to rely on God.

Now by the time Jesus gives us the Lord’s Prayer, bread has long since become a metaphor. Yes, we need bread literally, or at least we need some kind of food every day, but that’s what makes bread such a powerful image for everything else we need. We need air to breathe, and a body that works, and something worthwhile to do, and music and laughter and love and play. We need all these things, and every single thing we need, even if we get it by way of our own efforts or through other people, comes ultimately from the hand of God. Day by day, we live by the mercy and grace of God alone.

Jesus reminds us that what we need most of all is God. The irony, of course, is that the more richly God blesses us with comfort and strength and resources of every kind, the more we are tempted to idolatry – to put our faith in the gifts instead of the Giver. Many of us here, by the world’s standards, are among the most richly blessed people on the planet. Which means that we, of all people, need most to be reminded of our daily dependence on God, because what’s obvious to the billions who live on the edge of subsistence is easy to forget for those who are, on the whole, quite comfortable and secure.

So Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, by way of reminding us that everything we need, and every new day, is a gift from heaven. But then he goes a step further, and he makes an astonishing claim. He says that he himself

is the bread from heaven – that is, he is the source, ultimately, of all that we need. Well that’s the sort of outrageous claim that causes some of his hearers to pick up rocks to stone him. Jesus claims things about himself that everyone knows belong to God alone. If the man isn’t just crazy, then some of the religious leaders decide that he’s a blasphemer, and under the law of Moses the penalty for blasphemy is death.

As it turns out, those religious leaders do manage to have Jesus put to death for blasphemy, though they have to charge him with sedition, too, in order to persuade the Romans to get rid of him as a threat to law and order in the Empire. And that would have been the end of Jesus, he would have been a footnote to history instead of the hinge of history, if it hadn’t been for Easter. The people of Palestine were used to crucifixion as an object lesson about not messing with the power of the Empire. They were accustomed to crucifixion, but they were completely shocked by resurrection.

It’s because of Easter that we know Jesus matters. It was only on the other side of Easter that Jesus’ strange words about being the bread of life began to make sense to his disciples. Within a couple decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Paul was already writing about what he learned from eyewitnesses: that Jesus not only had wise words to live by, but he himself was the living Word of God. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God ... all things have been created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together.” It turns out that this Jesus who said such strange things while he lived, and was put to death for saying them, rose again to prove that what he said was true after all. He not only has the bread of life,

he *is* the bread of life, the bread sent down from heaven, like manna in the desert.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is our reminder of that great truth. It reminds us, in a way that words alone never could, that we depend on the Spirit of Christ to sustain us every day. That's one reason why coming to church once or twice a year misses the point. It's like saying, "Why do I need to eat this week? I ate last April, and then again in late December." Those of us who gather here every week, and pray "Give us this day our daily bread," know that our hearts are hungry for this living word. It feeds us, and sustains, and not only shows what a good life could be, but gives us the grace and strength to live it.

So here's a meditation for you to consider while you receive the Lord's Supper. What do you need from God every day? Do you see the ways in which God provides it? Do you see how everything you really need comes ultimately from the grace of God, through the Word God spoke and continues to speak, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ? Think on these things, and see whether you don't find in him the bread that satisfies the greatest hunger and the deepest longing of your soul.



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