

## Scripture for Sunday August 5<sup>th</sup> 2018

### Exodus 16:2-3, 9-15

<sup>2</sup> In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup> The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

<sup>9</sup> Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'" <sup>10</sup> While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud. <sup>11</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>12</sup> "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'" <sup>13</sup> That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup> When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. <sup>15</sup> When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat."

### John 6:24-35

<sup>24</sup> Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. <sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." <sup>28</sup> Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." <sup>30</sup> So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" <sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" <sup>32</sup> Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." <sup>34</sup> "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread." <sup>35</sup> Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

## Sermon: “I am the Bread of Life”

Last week’s sermon was on the feeding of the 5000 from John 6, and today’s follows on from that. However, the Lectionary skips over the “Jesus walking-on-water episode” and picks up the story when some in the crowd track Jesus and his disciples down in Capernaum “on the other side of the lake.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, for a while we have been following the Jesus story from Mark’s perspective and now the Lectionary switches to that of John for a few weeks. This change in author perspective is important, and I will discuss that briefly in a moment. Nevertheless, the feeding of the 5000 is repeated in *all* four Gospels, even though there are differences in *where* and *how* this incident is placed within the overall ministry of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Today, we explore the discussion that follows, but first let’s consider John’s approach.

John makes it clear in his first chapter that Jesus *came from God*; he writes, “the Divine Word became flesh and lived among us, [that is Jesus], and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>3</sup> John the Baptist also concluded that Jesus was the “Chosen One of God,” since he witnessed the God’s Spirit descend and remain on him.<sup>4</sup> Later, the author describes the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus about being born “from above,” that new life is a work of God’s Spirit; [I preached about that on Trinity Sunday].<sup>5</sup> Jesus also had a conversation with the Samaritan woman at a well where he revealed that he was the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>6</sup> In that conversation he said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”<sup>7</sup> And two chapters later, we have the incident of the feeding of the 5000, and those two events relating to water and bread need to be twinned together. Even so, the way that Mark, Matthew, and John relate the feeding of the 5000 in the wilderness immediately *followed* by Jesus walking on water has echoes of God’s provision of manna during the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea. Today’s reading in John makes this Mosaic connection explicit. Whatever we are to make of these passages today, we must also acknowledge the significance of the memories these incidents evoked in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish audience.

The people were looking for a *political* savior who would restore world order around Israel’s own ambitions. We sometimes find this perspective strange because there is generally a distinct separation between religion and politics in our Western world. That was *not* the way the Jews looked at the world in the first century - nor today for that matter. What they desired was that God’s “Chosen One” would *not merely* start a “religious” revolution but a transformation of *all* of life, including political self-governance, general social well-being, as well as spiritual reform of the Temple from corrupt influences.

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:25.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:32-52; Matt 14:13-33; Luke 9:10-17. (Luke omits the story of Jesus walking on the water.)

<sup>3</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:32-34.

<sup>5</sup> John 3:5-8. Also see: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/The-Trinity-The-God-We-Didnt-Want.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> John 4:25-26.

<sup>7</sup> John 4:13-14.

Unlike Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist killed, they wanted a *good* King, a good shepherd,<sup>8</sup> one who would look after the people and not merely himself. The gospel writer tells us that, following the feeding of the 5000, Jesus realized the crowd's desire to forcibly make *him* king and so he withdrew to the mountain by himself.<sup>9</sup> While Jesus did not come as a *political* Messiah, following Jesus *has* political consequences – not least in the way we vote in a democracy today. Yet Jesus *did* start a revolution that has changed world history, and God's actions in history are not over yet!

John's Gospel is the only one that presents the following discussion and, as we will see, it is full of irony! The way John tells the story, it is with those political aspirations in mind that they track Jesus down and wondered how and where he got to Capernaum. Jesus responds on his own terms: "I tell you the solemn truth, you are looking for me, *not* because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 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."<sup>10</sup>

What are we to make of this? While Christians believe that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, such a claim is often more difficult to comprehend than we sometimes imagine! That revelation does not usually come directly or unambiguously in the gospels; each writer slowly presents evidence in making their case. Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah,<sup>11</sup> but he does not come to the people in a way that they can readily understand or recognize – but that was not helped by their preconceived ideas, nor the dangerous times in which they lived. We must also remember that the people in that crowd didn't have the benefit of John's readers, including us, who witnessed this revelation step-by-step throughout the gospel. Moreover, things only become clearer with hindsight, in light of Christ's death and resurrection.

First, Jesus challenges the people here by saying they have come with wrong motives.<sup>12</sup> They had eaten all the bread that they wanted so their *physical* hunger had been satisfied. But, curiously, it seems as if they do not understand, as we - the reader - along with the disciples do, that they had just *participated* in a spectacular miracle. They were focused on the miracle, *not* its *significance*. The miracle was a sign that pointed to God being at work right now in Jesus the Messiah - and not merely in the days of Moses.

The crowd then asks, "What must *we do* to accomplish the deeds God requires?"<sup>13</sup> Remember, many people in those days were dutifully religious and they knew that God had given them the Ten Commandments by which to live. Then, as often is the case now, people saw following God as trying to keep those rules and in performing the right religious rituals from time to time. They also understood there to be three groups of people: good people, bad people, and those somewhere in between who, by doing the appropriate deeds, could be transferred into the "good" group. Their question, then,

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<sup>8</sup> John 10:1-19.

<sup>9</sup> John 6:15.

<sup>10</sup> John 6:26-27. See also Isa 55:2. This use of "perish" is obviously reminiscent of the perishable manna in Exodus 16:18-21.

<sup>11</sup> John 6:14; 1:14.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they were hoping for something more obviously military or political.

<sup>13</sup> John 6:28; NET Bible.

reveals that they expected Jesus to lay down a list of things for them *to do*. But this is *not* how Jesus viewed the world, and this is a key feature of the Jesus revolution. Jesus responds, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*”<sup>14</sup> First, recall that Jesus being “sent by God” is a major theme of John’s Gospel. Second, recall the words from John 1:17, “The law indeed was given through Moses; *grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ.” In other words, Jesus is *not* giving a new exposition of the detailed commandments within the Old Testament [i.e., the Torah]; if anything, what is being commanded is to embrace a radical change of heart. And *that* begins with a recognition that behind Jesus, and everything that he is doing, is the same God who was at work in the Exodus story.

The people respond with, “Prove it! If you want us to take your claim seriously then what miraculous sign will you do so that we can believe you?”<sup>15</sup> And they remind Jesus that their ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, even citing the psalmist who said, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”<sup>16</sup> They seemingly cannot see the *significance* of the miracle they witnessed!<sup>17</sup> The crowd has enjoyed the *experience* of the food but had failed to see its *relevance*. Incidentally, we should appreciate that there *was* a strong rabbinic belief at that time that when the Messiah came, he would give them manna again! Perhaps that is why this miraculous account is in all *four* gospels. Regardless, Jesus reminds them that the psalmist was *not* referring to Moses, but to *God* as being the source of the manna - that bread from heaven. Jesus then adds, “My Father is giving you the *true* bread from heaven.”<sup>18</sup> This intimate, personal connection between Jesus and God the Father is another one of those key themes in John.<sup>19</sup> Jesus goes on: “For the bread of God *is the One who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*”<sup>20</sup> Bit-by-bit John is using this discussion to reveal the identity of Jesus. The real gift is the life-giving person of Jesus, who then says explicitly: “*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*”<sup>21</sup>

This is a profound statement on many levels. First, earlier with the Samaritan women at the well, Jesus describes himself as “living water”<sup>22</sup>; here Jesus is the true “bread of heaven.” Both echo God’s gracious provision in the Exodus of water from the rock and manna from heaven.<sup>23</sup> Jesus is, then, *both* water and manna, the most basic needs of life - but with *divine* qualities. It was commonly thought that the real “manna” that people had at the time of Jesus was the instruction from the Old Testament Law. But, in fact, that rule-keeping has not - and does not - give life; it only highlights our deficiencies. Only God himself can give life, as Jesus told Nicodemus. Jesus came down from heaven and made *true life* freely available to the world. The people were hungry to believe that Jesus could give them what they

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<sup>14</sup> John 6:29.

<sup>15</sup> John 6:30.

<sup>16</sup> Ps 78:24 (referring to Exod 16:4-35.) Indeed, this discourse is often seen as a rabbinical commentary on Ps 78:24; 70-72.

<sup>17</sup> If John has redacted material from synagogue teaching in Capernaum (since Jesus is referred to as “Rabbi”) with the feeding of the 5000 crowd, then it is possible these questioners did not participate in that miraculous event.

<sup>18</sup> John 6:32.

<sup>19</sup> See John 14:6-11.

<sup>20</sup> John 6:33.

<sup>21</sup> John 6:34. See also Isa 55:1-5; Rev 21:6; 22:17.

<sup>22</sup> John 4:13-14.

<sup>23</sup> See Exod 16:4-35; 17:1-7 and Num 20:1-13.

sought, but they had yet to learn that he *himself* is the gift. Jesus is both the *gift* and the *giver*, something we celebrate at Holy Communion, where we relive Christ's death and resurrection until he comes again. We have that *same* invitation to come to Jesus, the bread of life, one that is not coerced but given without exception to those who receive.

Second, "I am the Bread of Life" is also the first of the famous "I AM" statements in John's Gospel. Earlier in the year, I preached on "I am the good shepherd" and "I am the true vine" - you can reread those sermons from the church's website if you wish. Not only do they reveal the identity of Jesus using familiar metaphors from everyday life, but the use of the word "I AM" has rich meaning to Jews. It also links back to Moses, this time and the burning bush incident where God revealed his intimate personal name as, Yahweh: "I AM THAT I AM."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Jesus walked across the water he also identified himself to his *disciples* with that same divine name, "I AM."<sup>25</sup> Not only were John's audience beginning to understand this bold connection between Jesus and Moses, but the - even bolder - connection between Jesus and God the Father. We read later that this claim to be God's envoy and the provocative "I AM" statements move the discussion into further controversy - and eventually forcing a decision of faith, or one of rejection.

As we allow the text to ask questions of us today, not only does it challenge us to believe in Jesus as revealing God to us, but it also reminds us that we too can come to Jesus with the wrong motives or with inappropriate demands for miracles as a precondition for belief. On that latter point: miracles are transient, as all miracles are; a hungry person is fed but will go hungry again. The sick person is healed, but eventually will die. The victim of oppression is delivered but may become enslaved or addicted to some other power. These visible acts of liberation, though important, are *not* meant to be the primary focus. So, like the crowds, are *we* seeking dramatic *experiences* of God but completely miss the deeper *sign*? Do we come to church wanting a weekly fix of worship music? Or do we come to church to be encouraged by familiar words and teaching that affirm what we already believe? Or do we come to find community with common valued traditions? As understandable and important as all those desires are, they can be dangerous. In the same way, *we* can misunderstand *grace* when we focus on *wanting* and *doing* all kinds of *things* that are good in themselves, but fail to first *come* to Jesus, the One whom God sent. In other words, do *we* also persist in *misunderstanding* God's grace? Instead of focusing on good deeds, or striving to keep the 10 commandments, or pursuing spiritual experiences, or noble political and social causes, Jesus simply is offering himself as the true bread of heaven that gives life. This is different because it implies a *relationship* with God, not a set of *rules*, and not a transitory experience. When we focus on good deeds, we are focusing on *our* achievements. When we focus on *grace*, we focus on the *giver* and the *gift*. There is a mystery here, one that John continues to explore in the rest of this long chapter. But one thing is for sure, we must *not* try and reduce the meaning of "Jesus as

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<sup>24</sup> Exod 3:14. (Or "I will be what I will be.")

<sup>25</sup> John 6:20. (The "It is I" is the same as "I am" in Greek.)

being the Bread of Life” to some simple formula, because that would be like trying to control the untameable, reducing it to our own agendas and thereby destroying grace itself.

Another challenge today is that *why* should we come to the Bread of Life at all when in our comfortable lifestyles we lack for nothing. This claim of Jesus can be a hard saying for those who have everything. Many today live with no reference to God, their Maker. But I would say that is merely “existence” and *not* “life in all its fullness.”<sup>26</sup> There are many unhappy wealthy people who are aware of a void in their lives that money can’t buy. Too often we forget to pursue what really matters. Living life with God is far more than physical existence.

In conclusion, what does it mean *practically* to *come* to Jesus and to *believe* that he has been *sent* by God to *give* us that kind of satisfied and fulfilled life? I suggest we *begin* by taking some time out to be alone with God and to talk to him as if he were there with you. Sounds silly? Maybe, as Christian we believe the Spirit of Jesus is with us all the time. Just talk to him, tell him what is on your mind. Both the joys and the concerns of life. I wouldn’t suggest you talk out-loud in public, though! Be private. Jesus withdrew to be quiet with God; that seems a good example to follow. What this does is to *consciously* include Jesus in all you do - as individuals and as a family. There is a mystical element to this act. Ideally, find time for this every day. It is a new way of thinking, of living, where we receive, or adopt, the gift of Jesus himself *into* our lives, into our very existence, in a living relational way. It begins this journey of exploring a gift that is never exhausted, a satisfaction that never will be surpassed.

I close with these words from Isaiah: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.”<sup>27</sup>

Jesus said: “I am the bread of life. I have that gift and if you *come* to me you will never go hungry and if you *believe* in me you will never be thirsty. Amen.

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<sup>26</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 55:1-3.