

The Rev. Nathan Self
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 16:2-4,9-15, Psalm 78:23-29, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
August 4, 2024

Sometimes the lectionary is constructed perfectly. At its best, it shows the interweaving of narratives throughout Scripture. From beginning to end Scripture is filled with threads that contrast and support each other and placing them directly next to each other brings their ongoing internal conversation.

How many of you have seen the backside of embroidery or textile art?

Ok, you know how on the front it looks all neat and on the flip side you see the tangle of threads that all go into making the picture? Here too there are a tangle of references to the Old Testament and we're going to begin by looking at the tangle to understand the depth of the picture before us.

We begin today with God feeding the children of Israel as they wander the wilderness. We're told that for 40 years, they are sustained every day by heavenly bread. Day by day, God teaches them to put their faith in God's power and providence rather than the might of Pharaoh or their ability to care for themselves.

We move from the event itself to Israel's reflection on God's saving grace in the Psalms. Finally, we end with Jesus reenacting and building on this wilderness story in John.

And today's story is built upon last week's introduction. Last week in our passage from John we heard that Jesus was teaching people on a mountain, which is a strong reference to Moses teaching on Mount Sinai. We also heard that he was teaching during Passover, a time that celebrates God's liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

The people's reaction to this event is to cry "Finally, the prophet we've been waiting for." As Rev Rose Anne pointed out last week, this exclamation of "prophet" refers to not only Moses but also Elisha.

Remember, Moses was the prophet who freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and Elisha organized a national spiritual/political revitalization movement under a corrupt Israelite king (as well as multiplied food to feed a large crowd). This combination is especially appropriate because the people in Jesus' day are facing opposition from sources both foreign and domestic. They were conquered by Rome and were heavily taxed through their leaders in Jerusalem (SIDE NOTE: when John says "The Jews" he's almost always referring to these leaders, not the people as a whole). Jesus combined this tradition of resistance to foreign and domestic powers and called people to give their loyalty to God.

The author weaves all of these connections, and more, to the Exodus, the Passover, and revival movements to help us understand who Jesus is. He is another prophet, another person appointed by God to save Their people from their enemies and reorient them to God's way of living.

And, as we've said, today we begin with the story of the manna and end with the people asking Jesus to feed them again as God did with the bread from Heaven.

How does he respond? "I am the bread from heaven sent to give life to the world. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Now let's pause.

This passage may be familiar to many of you. We hear it once or twice a year each year in the lectionary. But let's tune in to the strangeness of this passage. Poor people, people for whom bread means survival, ask Jesus to feed them like God fed the people in the Wilderness.

He responds that he is this bread and whoever believes in him will never be hungry.

What could Jesus possibly mean here?

Two lines of questions come immediately to my mind to better understand this passage. What does he mean by "belief" and why is he saying he's bread?

Let's begin with belief. Belief seems easy to understand. We hear people talk about believing in Jesus all the time. However, I don't think we're set up well to understand what Jesus meant.

When I hear Jesus say, "The work of God is to believe in him who sent me" I immediately have the ghost of Billy Graham asking me to kneel down, pray a prayer, and believe in Jesus.

This Evangelical definition of "belief" is intellectual and conceptual. It asks us "do you believe Jesus existed and died and rose again for you?"

However, modern writers define the 1st-century definition of belief less intellectually and more existentially. It's about loyalty and commitment. We still use it like this just not with Jesus. A contemporary example of this meaning might be: "The democratic party stopped BELIEVING in President Biden. He dropped out of the race because the party no longer had FAITH he could fulfill his campaign promises."

That's not a condemnation or an endorsement. It's an example of how we are using the words of faith and belief but no one is talking about whether a guy named Joe actually exists. We're talking about trust, loyalty, and commitment to a certain vision for the world.

Jesus' vision of the world is one of supreme trust and loyalty in the Triune God. For his audience, this meant ceding their loyalty from Rome and the leaders in Jerusalem and giving it to God the Creator and Jesus our Redeemer. We have a different context but we still have powers that ask for our allegiance. The State asks us to give them allegiance above all other commitments and says Americans are worth more than any other human life on the planet.

Capitalism asks us to find our meaning in work and making a profit and says people are only as useful as they are able to work and only as valuable as their paycheck. Our cultural narrative of the Family says we find true satisfaction in our Romantic partner and asks us to sacrifice all other relationships to make our Nuclear family home. We could go on.

Jesus says that our true family is supposed to be the Church, not just St Paul's but the universal Church. The Church continues his Incarnation as His Body in the world. This Body breaks the bonds of family and Nation. Scripture calls the Church strangers and aliens wherever they go because their primary citizenship is in God's Kingdom not their state. This Body, like Christ, is oriented to helping and organizing for the least, the last, and the lost and views all people as inherently valuable because God created them.

You can see what he means when he says that believing in God is truly the work of God. It's a high calling.

So when Christ says belief and faith he means loyalty and commitment.

What does he mean when he says bread?

I think it's helpful here to remember that this text is written to churches to help them understand their own story. This passage doesn't make sense if we just imagine Jesus looking at hungry people and saying that he is bread. It's a little more clear when we remember this is aimed for a community that was centered around care for the poor and celebration of the Eucharist.

In case some in the back can't see I have an unconsecrated Priest's host with me.

This is what Jesus means when he says I am the Bread of Life

Like the reference to manna from Heaven, this chief symbol of the Church represents all the ways that we connect with God, are fed by Them, and are transformed into God's image. The whole arc of Scripture is God seeking a deeper relationship with humanity until They offer their body to bring us into the Divine Life. Our church teaches that when we consume the Eucharist we are stitched together into the Body of Christ across the world. We believe it is more than an intellectual sign but an act of God that effects God's will. It gives life to the world because it connects us to the Source of all life- the Triune God.

John weaves together all these threads and references, more than we have time to mention, to show how God's work culminates in the life and ministry of Jesus that continues in our midst today. We are asked to give our loyalty to God before all else and are sustained in that commitment by the Bread of Life through the Eucharist.

This passage calls us to a life of commitment to God first and foremost, which will look differently for each one of us. For me over the years it has meant starting a union, it meant moving to rural Tennessee for seminary, and then coming to Cleveland to work with Greater Cleveland Congregations. These moves threw my life into chaos and were difficult on every level but I've been sustained through it all by God through the sacraments and a great community around me, like the one you have here.

God's call always upends something and asks us to make difficult choices, assess our priorities, and step out in faith. But it's always worth it in the end. It's always, always worth it.

Last time I was able to preach here, we talked about what God might be calling y'all to do as a church. I understand you're starting a long-term discernment project which sounds wonderful I can't wait to hear what comes out of it.

Now you get to do whatever y'all feel called to and there are many many great things to invest your time and power in. But here's something along the lines of what that could look like.

Some of you know that Cleveland is one of the most food-insecure cities in the United States. By some estimates, we rank third among all cities in the US. A church of your size, with your connections, could say- we have a tradition of God feeding and caring for the immediate needs of Their people. Our church is organized around a ritual meal that makes us into the Bread of Life for the world. We're going to continue that tradition by making sure no one in our area will go hungry (define area however you want). We're going to find out what populations aren't already served and make sure that no child, no elder, no one God has created and called Good has to go to sleep hungry. That would be a wild commitment, luckily you have church neighbors like Fairmount Presbyterian, Church of the Saviour, First Baptist, and many many others that are well-resourced and share your commitment to be Christ to the World and can be partners in your work.

Perhaps, some of you are thinking, Nathan- it's all well and good for God to feed people, we're supposed to rely on God for our needs, but we don't want to disempower people and get them to depend on us to meet their needs. I agree! This is why it is so great that you and all those other churches I named are members of Greater Cleveland Congregations so you could simultaneously meet an urgent need and investigate why it exists. Why are people hungry, sick, poor, and homeless in the wealthiest nation on the planet? People create systems that cause those outcomes and people like you can fix those systems.

The story of the universe is Holy Mystery drawing humanity into relationship. They are calling

everyone who will listen to join Them and commit to Their vision of the world. They envision a world where all are equal, violence ceases, and every need is satisfied. You individually and collectively have a part to play in this vision. I can't wait to see what y'all do together.