

Are you experiencing déjà vu yet?

Even if you weren't in church last week, you've probably heard this phrase: Bread from Heaven. Today is week 2 out of 5 in the Bread of Life series from the Gospel of John.

When Pastor Anne, and Pastor Bryon asked if I wanted to preach this morning, I was happy to! It wasn't until after I'd looked up the texts that I realized, sure enough: three years ago, I preached for the first time at Phinney, on these same texts: Bread from Heaven. Talk about déjà vu! And NO! I'm not just going to re-read my sermon from three years ago. Much has happened in these 3 years, for everyone here. This time, when I looked at these texts, new things jumped out at me, as I expect happens to you when you read or hear stories and scripture again and again.

The Exodus story in particular caught my attention, for many reasons, but especially the Israelites complaint: They wish they had died in comfort back in Egypt instead of starving in the wilderness, because at least there they sat by the [stewpots] and ate their fill of ... bread.

The Israelites seem to have fallen into the trap of nostalgia. Compared to what they face now, their memories of captivity sure seem great! The realities of being stuck in debt as indentured servants, as slaves; of their experience of brutal treatment, stripped dignity, and removal of agency; of being denied nourishment from the meat cooking nearby while they ate bread; the harsh realities of life under Pharaoh have softened in hindsight. The Israelites think back to their Master, Pharaoh, as giving them comfort and plenty, but this rose-colored memory is only an illusion.

It is God who is set to show them true abundance, even in the barren wilderness. We can note that, with God as our master and Lord, what seems like scarcity may in fact be abundance. God sends the Israelites this weird stuff, that's kind of like bread, every morning. Like most of us would do, the Israelites ask: "What is it!?" Literally: "Manna!?" And the Israelites will not only have enough bread to fill their bellies, but also meat every day. They can have their quail... and eat it too!

Many of us are familiar with the Exodus story, and it seems to take a while for the Israelites to recognize that God is and will continue to be their Lord... a long while... and maybe they, maybe we, never really get it.

Nevertheless, Mana seems to have made an impression on the descendants of Israel, because even hundreds, maybe thousands of years later, people are still talking about it. The crowd following Jesus around the Galilee are still hungry, and they remember how their ancestors ate Manna, bread from heaven. Now remember: Jesus already fed them once – we heard last week about Jesus feeding thousands. Since they are still following him around, Jesus takes the bread they have already eaten, and turns it into an object lesson: Everything we have, our daily bread, is from God – not from Moses, or any other civic or religious leader – but from

God. And, Jesus tells them that: “the true bread from heaven... gives life to the world.”¹ He says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”²

I wonder how we respond to Jesus revealing God’s presence and purpose in this way. I’m thinking of the similarities between two revelations in John’s Gospel: Christ revealed as Living Water to the Samaritan woman, and as Bread of Life to the crowd here in Capernaum. The Samaritan woman exclaims: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”³ The crowd responds: “Sir, give us this bread always.”⁴ So how do we respond?

When we come to this table, to drink from the cup which is “gushing up to eternal life,”⁵ and to eat from the bread which “gives life to the world,”⁶ aren’t we in fact saying, “Sir, give us this eternal life you promise!” “Sir, give us your abundance in exchange for our scarcity!”

Many things bring us to this table: hunger and thirst, guilt and repentance, longing and hope, joy and gratitude... But do we realize what we are asking for? When we receive and take into ourselves the very real presence of Christ Jesus, can we even imagine what it means to participate in God’s eternal life!?

Many things bring us to God. And God offers us eternal life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus talks about eternal life as being in the present. He is not describing some future reward in some far-off heaven, but a reality to be experienced here and now. So why do we keep needing to come back to this table again and again!? What is keeping us from this eternal life without hunger or thirst? What is keeping us from being completely transformed by Christ within us?

Well, we live in a pretty messed up world. I am certain that God weeps alongside us, and feels every suspicious stare, every cruel silence, every insult, every bullet, every bomb we fling at one another. And we get so caught up in all the things that mess us up: the perfectionism that tells us we are not good enough or ready enough to receive God’s grace through Communion or through Confession & Forgiveness; the fear that tells us that our attempts will fail so it’s not worth trying; the messages that those other people are too different for us to listen and hear and see one another; that if I do notice those other people, their problems are none of my business.

The Israelites could not see the reality of God’s abundance, because they fell into the trap of nostalgia. One trap I have come to recognize in my life, as a white, cis-het woman, confronted by the sins of racism, sexism, homophobia, & so many other “isms” which prevent us from loving one another the way God intends. My trap is restrained, polite, silence.

¹ John 6:32 & 33

² John 6:35

³ John 4:15

⁴ John 6:34

⁵ John 4:14

⁶ John 6:33

As a sensitive child, I was often very aware of the beauty and the pain in the world. And as a little girl, I did not have a filter to prevent harsh words which crossed my mind from exiting my mouth. So, I was taught the phrase: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, then don’t say anything at all.”

It was not my parent’s intent to silence their little girl, but (along with other cues from a society which raises little white girls to be sweet, gentle, and submissive) I internalized this life lesson, meant to teach kindness, as “Don’t say anything.” So, when I experienced anger and hurt, I didn’t say anything. I drew further and further into myself as years went on and that anger and hurt piled up, hidden away. I would come to the table, eat and drink what Jesus offers, maybe even catch a taste of the bread of life! But I experienced scarcity where God offers abundance; there was a chasm between the life I was living and living eternity as reality.

I can’t say that this chasm has disappeared. But I am learning to *unlearn* my internalized silence. I am learning the holiness of feeling anger at injustice and harm done to God’s creation. I am learning a modified lesson – instead of, “Don’t say anything;” “Say what needs to be said from a place of love.” This feels in line with the Jesus I read in the Gospels, and the lessons of the early Church. And it feels like a way I can allow that chasm to narrow. A way to listen for the Holy Spirit’s urging. A way to follow Jesus and accept God’s invitation to eat & drink at the table.

We get to take Jesus into our bodies week after week, so we know that Christ is fully among us. And this is good news! What is even better news is that Christ is transforming us, week after week. So instead of buying into: “It’s not my place” to speak up or to feel angry every time I encounter suffering in this messed up world, I get to claim my place, alongside ALL my siblings, those gathered here and those beyond these walls, we claim our places at God’s table.

With the Samaritan woman and the crowd in Galilee who see Christ revealed as living bread and water, let’s proclaim: Sir, give me, give us this bread always, so that your will be done in us, eternally. Amen.