

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34: 1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51.

### **Bread of life discourse continued**

Two weeks ago we began the portion of John's Gospel called the "Bread of Life" Discourse." In today's lesson we continue with this theme, noting that John is using his distinctive language to point to the real identity of Jesus.

We hear Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." For those who study John's Gospel, it is well known that he uses what is called "I AM" statements throughout his Gospel. No one else does this. He uses "I AM" statements to create a symbolic foundation of understanding about Jesus. John writes poetically and symbolically to help the listener and the reader understand who in the world Jesus of Nazareth really is and why he is important.

The establishment Jewish leaders were not sure at all who Jesus was. John captures the skepticism of many with the words we heard today: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" I am sympathetic with those who questioned this. How in the world were they to know that God was doing something unique through a young male they had known for years? A young man who was like every other young Jewish man, but now is manifesting as an extraordinary human being? Even more than that...that he is the "living bread that comes down from heaven." How was it that this Jesus was performing miracles and signs, i.e., wondrous deeds that set him apart from the ordinary?

### **The words**

From our perspective 2000 years plus, away from the land and customs of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, it does not sound strange to hear the words of John. We are accustomed to

them, are we not? We love the words—they are comforting and spiritually enigmatic. But to those who knew Jesus and knew his humble background, words which elevated his status to something extraordinary, even divine, would be hard to accept.

I imagine some people ignored him—wrote him off as deluded—while others were deeply concerned that this man of their own community was a trouble maker or, worse, blasphemous! Remember, Jesus was one of their own. He was not some hot-shot who came in from afar. He was not a consultant from McKinsey or a famous Rabbi. He was Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, from the small town of Nazareth. It is not hard to imagine the skepticism that prevailed, even though Jesus became known as a Teacher, a Rabbi, who attracted a following which went far beyond the group of disciples he assembled as he began his public ministry.

### **Why and when**

We've begun answering the question: "Why did he write his Gospel?" by clarifying that John used symbolism to help define the identity of Jesus. He, in no way, attempted to be an historian or archeologist. He used his gifts of expression to reflect upon the nature of Jesus and his role in God's plan of salvation for humanity.

You might ask "When did John write this Gospel?" Scholars date his work in the decade of the 90's or maybe as late as 120 A.D. In other words, John wrote considerably after Jesus was condemned to death by the people who did not see him as Lord of All, but as one who threatened the stability of Judaism as well as Roman rule.

John was not particularly concerned with time-lines and facts other than to use them to make theological assertions. He was concerned with giving us a framework of theological thinking about the nature of Jesus. His approach serves us throughout

our entire lives, helping us to prepare for life with God eternally.

John also helps us see the creative and transforming work Jesus does. He uses “signs” to demonstrate the divine nature of Jesus, beginning with the water and wine sign in the second chapter of his Gospel. It is not in the scope of this sermon to look at all the signs manifested in the Gospel of John, but I do want to refer again to the Prologue of John’s Gospel. In those first 18 verses, John sets out the theme of revelation of God’s Self in the world. The *Logos*: the Word. The symbolism found in the Prologue sets the stage for the entire Gospel.

### Gladstone’s Library

Last fall when I was on my three month sabbatical, I had the opportunity to study the Gospel of John at Gladstone’s Library in Wales. Our professor was a Christian; however, he is Indian and grew up in the Hindu religious tradition. I think his background was especially helpful to challenge the western mindset held by most persons in the class. He challenged us to look beyond the words we have become accustomed to hearing and enter into the mystery of the language of John.

Our task was to embrace ambiguity and be willing to wrestle with concepts of God’s revelation through Jesus. He teased us all along with his humor, but was serious with his teaching. I learned to appreciate John in a whole new way, and hope you also will experience the excitement of John’s theological and literary approach to living with the mystery of God. Let the Gospel of John speak to your soul. Let it be a spiritual, mystical portal for discovery of the magnificent ways of God.

### Hebrew Bible and John

One fascinating part of the lesson we read today from John is found in its references to

portions of the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. For example, the sentence, “Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” In a few more lines Jesus is saying to them: “Do not complain among yourselves.” This is a reference to the Hebrews of old who murmured and grumbled against Moses after he led them into the wilderness as they proceeded toward the Promised Land. The murmurs of the Jews against Moses are now the murmurs against Jesus. Moses is the old guard; Jesus is the new. John is guiding his readers and his listeners toward the New Covenant with God through Jesus.

Moreover, Moses did not provide manna from heaven for the starving, wandering Jews in the wilderness. It was God who provided the manna from heaven. John proclaims that Jesus, because he is of and from the Father, not only provides bread for the hungry, he is the bread of life. Moses did wondrous things, but he never was the bread of life. In this example alone, we see how John crafts a contrast between the old and the new, Moses—a prophet—but not divine, with Jesus who shares divinity with God the Father. It’s a new day in the landscape of God’s plan of salvation.

That is why the Gospel is the Gospel: it is a portrayal of good news. Good news about what God does. It provides a way for us to enter into a relationship with God, through his essence as Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It’s a wondrous thing, this Triune God. A gift for us and a gift for all the world to embrace.

### Conclusion

Lastly, I think you will agree that the phrase, “I am the bread of life,” attributed to Jesus seems like the most natural thing in the world. It is he who brings us to life while we are on earth, and it is he who

invites us to partake of the bread—of him—  
and enter into life eternal.

It is time to rejoice in this truth and realize  
that as the followers of Jesus, the Christ, we  
partake of this mystery through Holy  
Communion and through membership in  
the mystical Body of Christ. Mystical it is,  
but it is true and real and life-giving. Give  
thanks for the creative ways of God entering  
into our lives and pray for those who are  
hungry, for those seeking the Bread of Life.

It is our call to share the bread—to share  
our lives in Christ with everyone—to listen  
to those who are hungry and thirsty, to  
those who are seeking something “more” in  
their lives, to those who are coming up  
empty in their pursuit of pleasure and gain...

That is our vocation. Our call. Our privilege.  
Together we can nourish this church  
community to become more and more that  
spiritual home where the Body of Christ is  
known in the breaking of the Bread and  
through the love we show for one another.

AMEN.

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