

“Are You Hungry?”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
John 6:24-35

This Sunday is the second in a series of weeks when the gospel tells us of bread. Last week, Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes for his thousands of listeners, making a feast of plenty out of a boy’s small offering. That act propels us into this week, one of many, when Jesus proclaims, “I am the bread of life.” In fact, for 4 weeks in a row, Jesus, from the gospel of John, repeats this lesson in different ways. 4 weeks, 4 helpings of bread; this series ends on our Communion Sunday. Hopefully, by then, your hunger for bread will be so stoked that what happens physically in the eating of bread and drinking of juice will have an especially resonant spiritual impact as well.

That may be. But what I keep thinking about is the bread machine that Chris bought a few months ago. She has been trying to avoid more processed foods, and thought that baking bread for the family would be a cheaper and healthier alternative than buying the more wholesome breads at the store. She made the first batch-- a basic, beautiful, loaf of bread-- perfect in its brown, firm crust, and springy white flesh. Her next batch was delicious too-- a honey wheat. Then she made a loaf of oat bread. Before that was done, there was a loaf of low-carb bread-- not so tasty. I typically try to limit my bread to a slice or two a day, if I have any. But the thing about freshly made bread-- that is, without the preservatives you find in store-bought bread-- is that you have to eat it in a day or two to really enjoy it at its best. By the time we would be getting around to finally eating the hardened heel of one loaf, another loaf would show up on our kitchen counter. Chris did finally slow down. But when I look at John 6, where Jesus keeps passing the idea of bread to us, right now I am thinking about that kind of abundance.

It’s kind of funny to be preaching on Jesus as the bread of life, when if you look around, you see there *is* no bread in the church today. We are not having a communion Sunday. Without these physical elements before us, we must really lean into the spiritual meaning of this phrase.

To understand the meaning of Jesus as the bread of life, we need to know something about our hunger. What are you hungry for? Is it community? Is it safety? Is it an experience of transcendence, whether from prayer, music, or even silence, that transports you from this physical, earthly moment, into something that feels like holy connection? Are you looking for comfort for your grief? Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Justice? Peace? Are you hungry to be seen? To be touched and loved? Are hungry for a new life?

I would like to say that church is an all-you-can-eat buffet of all of those things, where you can serve yourself heaping helpings of exactly what you crave. Perhaps in some ways it is. But chances are, what you might think you need spiritually is not on the menu the moment you show up before God.

Our passage in John starts with the people-- who had earlier been fed by the loaves from Jesus in Tiberias-- waking up to find that Jesus isn't there. They seem to be in a state of panic over this fact, so much so that they count the boats, see that one is missing, and decide to climb into other boats on their way to Capernaum, trying to find Jesus. When they find him, they demand to know when he left them and came to that place.

Jesus points out to them his suspicion that they are in search of him because the promise of bread--physical bread. But what they are missing, Jesus tells them, are the signs that he has been showing them all along-- spiritual signs that reach a hunger that even earthly bread does not touch. If you have access to this kind of bread-- the bread of life-- you will never hunger and thirst again.

"Sir, give us this bread, always!" they ask of him.

The other day I was walking to Wood Park to pick up my child from camp. I noticed a deer crossing the street, and then, bounding right behind her, was her wobbly-kneed fawn. They kept running in the direction I was walking-- the cut-through across the street from Anne Stebbin's house. When I got to the wooded area of the cut through, I saw two more fawns leap from another yard, and all of the sudden, there were three fawns, urgently and vigorously nursing from beneath their mother, all three at the same time. This is the kind of urgent hunger I am hearing from the demanding crowd-- and I wonder, how can Jesus possibly satisfy so deep a need from people?

My friend Dan was born in Vietnam, and left with his parents and brothers as refugees to the US when he was a young child. He is now doing well in a tech startup in San Francisco; we visited him and his family when we were out west last May. Reflecting on the pandemic, he shared how that feeling of scarcity we all felt at the beginning of the pandemic-- remember, when even the grocery store didn't feel safe, and there were shortages on basic food staples-- activated something in him he calls "food trauma." For Dan, coming from the experience of having unreliable sources of food and safety as a young child has left a part of his brain-- and his stomach-- fearful that there won't be enough food. His primal instinct therefore is to hoard food. But because he knows where that fear comes from, he has instead practiced mindful, healthy eating, as well as sharing food with others. He realized, he told me, that he could feed his trauma; acting out of fear, and binging on things he knows he doesn't need. Or, he could be mindful of his trauma, and make a different choice to delight in the blessing of food, eating it mindfully, and in sharing it with others-- both loved ones, and those in need in his community.

Did Jesus' followers also have a kind of food trauma that left them in a desperate hunger? It turns out, they did. First of all, there were vast inequalities in the Roman Empire. But there was

also a more ancient hunger in the collective memory of the people, passed down from generation to generation. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,” Jesus told the people. Then he went on to allude to the story of God providing manna and quail to the Hebrews who had been wandering in the wilderness. If you know that story, you will remember that one funny thing about manna is that The Lord told them to only gather what you need, no more, and no less, and eat what you need for the day. But the people did not listen, and some held on to some, hoping to store extra so they could have more for the next day. However, on the next day, the leftover manna had bred worms and became foul. The people needed to learn to rely completely on God to provide for them just what they needed.

But what exactly did they need from God in the wilderness? What did God provide the Hebrews, when they were casting off their chains of captivity and living their unbound, but frightening, new lives? How did God meet their anxiety with peace? What did God provide them? Well, God provided... “*what is it?*” Seriously. That’s what the word “manna” translates into from Hebrew. What. Is. It.

We are watching the Tokyo Olympics and I have noticed that each Olympic year, the host city designs a mascot. In Tokyo, Miraitowa’s and Someity are the cheerful mascots for the Olympics and the Paralympics. When I attended the Olympics in 1996 in my hometown of Atlanta, we had a mascot: a walking, blue, tear-shaped blob with rings around its eyes and tail. His name was “Whatizit?” which, due to his unpopularity, got shortened to the cuter Izzy.

What *is* it that God is offering you today? Chances are, it’s not the abundance of an all-you-can-eat buffet, nor is it the precise thing you would like to order from the menu. The Hebrews in the wilderness did not want manna and quail every morning and every night of the 40 YEARS they spent in the wilderness. But somehow, that same meal provided what they needed, nurturing them for that step across the Jordan River, into a new stage of communal understanding that had God at the center of it.

The disciples, the followers, didn’t know it, but Jesus was constantly preparing the people for his death and his leaving them. He wanted them to realize that even without Jesus physically with them, among them, they will be fed-- with something even more sustaining than bread.

This is not the Messiah the people ordered. But this Messiah-- even in his absence-- is somehow going to reach our deepest hunger. Maybe unless we know what we are hungry for, we won’t recognize it when we are full.