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I am the Bread of Life

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

2The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 9Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" 10And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 12"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" 13In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

John 6:24-35

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, 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." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

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Noah's Arc is one of those Bible stories that most people, religious or not, have heard and know. Noah, his family, the building of a large wooden boat, animals two by two, rain for 40 days and nights, the massive flood, the dove flying off coming back with an olive branch, and of course the rainbow. It is foundational story about God's desire to never again destroy and punish humanity. It is a story filled with both darkness and light.

Many parents and churches teach this story. Our family had a wonderfully illustrated picture book we read to our children: there are countless editions on the market. What made this particular version unique was what was on the last page. It pictured not the rainbow or the dove or the happy animals running down the gangway, it pictured what the deck, and down in the hold, looked like after many days of the world's animals cramped into the space along with Noah's entire family. To sum up the scene: the arc was a complete disaster mess. There was straw and hay everywhere and yes, remains of what 40 days and nights of animals must have left behind. The illustrator chose to 'keep it real.'

I think of that last image in the children's book as we turn to our gospel story this morning. This is the day after one of Jesus' greatest miracles -- the feeding of the five thousand from just five loaves of bread and two fish. That's a lot of people to feed and must have left a mark on the countryside -- even in a world before the plastic bottles and disposable bags of our day.

All were fed on that day with leftovers to spare. The crowd was excited beyond measure and wanted to crown Jesus king on the spot. But Jesus got on a boat and made his exit. Among the crowd there must have been a mix of elation, wonderment and confusion coupled with a lingering sense of wanting more.

When the crowd did catch up with Jesus, he quickly turned the table and found a way to pierce their expectations and redirect them to what matters most. He moved them from the instant relief of full bellies towards something harder to measure. Abundant and eternal life that begins now.

This is the ongoing work of a spiritual life, isn't it? To live and hopefully thrive in the space we can touch and feel -- the here, the now, the finite -- while also opening ourselves to mystery, what beyond our knowing and what is lasting.

This is how the Apostle Paul described this state in his letter to the Romans: 8: 18 "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. The whole creation groans inwardly while we await adoption. V. 22: We hope for what do not see."

We do not always see in the moment where God is acting, when Christ is most present and how the Holy Spirit is moving throughout our lives. We can easily mistake silence for absence and activity as substance.

I like Eugene Peterson's take on this gospel verse in The Message translation. Jesus says:

27 "Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last."

Wasted energy. That is something we all can relate to, right? Investing time and energy in things and priorities that fail to deliver inner peace and leave us more anxious than content, more empty than satisfied.

Now, we could despair, but God knows how very human we are. God knows our brokenness, our gifts, our fears and our hopes.

I confess that my greatest waste of energy comes down to worrying about things I cannot control.

I've long been a fan of Frederick Buechner, the one-time Chaplain at Phillips Exeter Academy and prolific author. I finally copied the following quote of his and tacked it up on my bulletin board above my computer screen:

"Stop trying to protect, to rescue, to judge, to manage the lives around you . . . remember that the lives of others are not your business. They are their business. They are God's business . . . even your own life is not your business. It also is God's business. Leave it to God. It is an astonishing thought. It can become a life-transforming thought . . . unclench the fists of your spirit and take it easy" — Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

Over the next four weeks we will be camping out in the 6th chapter of John. John speaks a different kind of language from Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is in John where we find the great "I am" statements, connecting him with God speaking to Moses in the Exodus story when God said: I AM WHO I AM.

"I am the good shepherd. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, truth, and the life, I am the true vine."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

What can this simple statement mean for our lives?

There is a story of a four-year old child who awoke one night frightened of the darkness around her. Many children are afraid of the dark, imagining monsters and all things scary. She ran to her parent's room and her mother finally was able to calm her down and lead her back to her bed and turned on the light. The mother said: "Don't be afraid, you are not alone here. God is in the room with you." The little girl replied: "I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin."

The wisdom and innocence of children always finds a way to cut through the chatter.

It has been said that the whole purpose of John's Gospel – which remember was believed to have been written some 70 years after Jesus lived and died – can be found at the very end in Chapter 20: 30-31.

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

To know Christ as the Son of God and have life – an abundant life at that – through him.

It begins and ends with trust.

'Trust' is a loaded and tricky word. It gets formed even before our memories take shape. How were we cared for, nurtured, protected, encouraged – or not – in our early years.

And there comes a time in all of our lives when we have to trust that we will be caught if we fall. We will be searched if we are lost -- bandaged up and healed when we are broken.

How does God even make this happen?

We heard last Sunday from the Letter to the Ephesians: God has the power to “work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

We become the ones who catch, bind up the wounded, search for the lost, and build up.

In the Episcopal Church, I still see many searching for a community they can trust to focus less on judgement and more on acceptance. Less on exclusion and more on acceptance. A community that values the questions even more than easy and quick answers.

And that is all good and right. And it is not enough.

We can take rightful pride in our openness and boldness for speaking out and standing up for those without power and voice. We can hold a broad middle space where seekers can find room to ask questions without judgement, where people can heal from past wounds and where tradition and the beauty of prayer language and music still has a place to inspire.

What did the people ask Jesus when they caught up with him: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

What did the child say to her mother: “I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin.”

All the justice, all the compassion, all the openness, all of the welcome we can muster is multiplied -- like those five loaves and fish -- when we turn to the One who said: "I am the bread of life." Believe. Trust. Be open.

That is our work.