

## “Bread of Earth, Bread of Heaven”

(Psalm 130; John 6: 30-51)

There’s a fascinating theme that shows up in a number of classic folktales from a wide variety of cultures. It has to do with a *trail of breadcrumbs* deliberately placed by a character in the story, and the *action* that results if the trail is followed—or not. A classic example—the one we know best in the Western world—is the story of Hansel and Gretel, in which those clever children, when abandoned in the forest, have the presence of mind to leave a breadcrumb trail by means of which to find their way back to their home. Except for some hungry forest animals, the plan would have worked, and it’s a significant detail in the story that the moment the breadcrumb trail is broken, that’s when Hansel and Gretel find themselves in a world of trouble. A similar breadcrumb trail shows up in at least one of the fables of Aesop. In a Chinese folktale, it’s a trail of rice and following the trail has to do with the fate of a fat duck. In an African story, it’s a trail of nuts, with a monkey in the leading role instead of a duck.

That breadcrumb trail fascinates me, partly out of a very local interest that has to do with our burgeoning population of wild turkeys in our region. I am often tempted to make such a trail from my yard right up the kitchen steps, just to test how clever—or *tasty*—those birds really are. More importantly though, and more pertinent to our task this morning, is the fact that there’s a similar breadcrumb trail that runs throughout the Bible. Have you ever noticed this before? There really is a trail of breadcrumbs that starts way back almost at the beginning of Israel’s history, it covers most of the geography of the Bible lands, and in our gospel text this morning you can actually see where that breadcrumb trail *culminates*. We get to see where the trail leads and where it will take *us* if we choose to *follow* it.

Let’s take a little trek along the Bible breadcrumb trail, but first let me warn you that the Bible’s variation on this theme gets a little complex, in the sense that there are *two* very different kinds of bread that enter into the story and the two are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they intersect or overlap. Sometimes they combine and make a new hybrid. But generally the pattern goes from “bread of *earth*”, which is the more familiar, daily sandwich kind of bread, toward “bread of *heaven*”, which has a notably lighter spiritual texture and which fills a rather different function in terms of life and nourishment.

Exactly *where* the Bible’s breadcrumb trail begins is hard to say. I think I can see a few crumbs already in the cycle of stories about Abraham, but the trail becomes much clearer somewhere between ancient Palestine and Egypt. When Jacob and his clan began to migrate toward Egypt, that was entirely about bread. The land they held suffered a prolonged drought and famine; they couldn’t produce the grain to make their bread. Egypt, of course, had plenty of water and fertile soil much better suited to growing crops. It’s a fact of history that Egypt’s enhanced ability to produce grain had everything to do with its rise to prominence among other ancient civilizations. Like the Sumerian civilization before them, or the Babylonians after, the greater the ability to produce food, the higher your place on the stage of world history.

Israel went to Egypt in search of bread of earth, food for survival, but they learned a terrible lesson about the price of that bread. Rather like Uncle Esau, who had sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew, presumably accompanied by a slice of bread, Israel sold the nation's birthright and freedom for a loaf of bread. The story of the Exodus and the long wilderness trek to regain their land and birthright is a story about following the trail of another kind of bread. This too is bread for survival, but it comes from a higher source. "Bread from heaven" is what the Hebrew word *manna* probably means, but it also has the sense of "bread for *tomorrow*" as opposed to bread that's merely for today or just for the present moment, bread that you eat once and then it's gone. But this bread from heaven is bread you can eat knowing there will be more tomorrow. "Bread that gives you a future" is how I would paraphrase it, and that's certainly how the Israelite people regarded it especially when they looked back on their history. This bread nourishes the *faith* that God is *aware* of their situation and *cares* deeply enough to provide what his people need.

When the wilderness trek is over and the people take up residence in a land "flowing with milk and honey", which is to say, a land that's well able to produce high quality food in abundance, Israel's prophets need to give the people reminders, time after time, not to spend all their energy on "bread that does not satisfy", bread that nourishes only temporarily, but rather to seek the heavenly bread that does satisfy and that nourishes permanently.

At the intersection of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, when Jesus the Messiah first appears, do you recall what happens just *before* his ministry begins? Jesus too has a wilderness experience in which bread is in short supply. His first encounter with temptation, not surprisingly, is to turn stones into bread, to feed himself and survive. There was nothing wrong with that idea. His Hebrew ancestors had survived only because they accepted miraculous bread in the wilderness. The *temptation* Jesus faced had nothing to do with self-preservation, but it *did* have to do with different kinds of bread. And if you remember how Jesus answers that temptation, you'll see that even before his teaching tour formally begins, he's already making his distinction between bread that sustains physical life and bread that sustains something far greater. The lesson in that story is that the bread of earth, whether made of grain or stone, is not enough. You won't be filled on that stuff. You can't live on that alone. You need what *God* sends you, what God alone can give to sustain the Spirit-life within you.

Ordinary bread is going to run out. The Governor of a Southern state, years ago, made room on his busy calendar to hear the plea of a woman that her husband be released from the state penitentiary. "What was he sentenced for?" asked the Governor. "For stealing a loaf of bread," replied the offender's wife. "Is he a good husband?" "No," she replied, blushing a bit. "He doesn't help around the house, he's not good with the kids, and he's never had a steady job." "It sounds to me as though you're better off without him," said the Governor. "Why on earth do you want him out of jail?" "Well," she explained, "we're out of bread again." See that? Some kinds of bread always run out.

Back onto that biblical breadcrumb trail, when Jesus teaches his disciples to *pray*, bread is mentioned among the things we are to ask for. But if you've been following the breadcrumb trail through the Scriptures, you realize already that it's not the bread of the *earth* that's in view here. It's not a *temporary fix* for a growling stomach. It's not a sandwich loaf we're taught to pray for. This is bread of heaven, *manna* bread, bread for *tomorrow*, bread for eternal life. This bread comes only through God, and it's God we are to ask for it, and *thank* for it, daily.

Earlier in this sixth chapter of John's gospel, a story we read just a couple of weeks ago, we saw Jesus doing something he did typically and perhaps frequently—when followed by a hungry crowd, he was sufficiently concerned about their hunger that he produced bread to feed and fill them all. Here we encounter one of those complex puzzling hybrids I mentioned earlier. It's clear in the story this is physical bread that people fed on, and it's instructive that the story mentions the crumbs left over, with the directive to *gather* those crumbs and not let any of them be wasted. If for nothing else, those crumbs are essential for maintaining the breadcrumb trail. But, at the same time, if this is bread that comes from the hand of Jesus, and if you know the truth about him and believe what he says about himself, then this clearly is bread from *heaven*. And those who eat this bread in faith are being nourished forever, satisfied eternally.

Well, here's your quiz for the day and here comes the climax of our meditation: Did you catch the culmination and destination of the Bible's breadcrumb trail in our text this morning? Did you hear something new that takes this whole discussion of bread to a radical new level? It's when Jesus says right out loud, *twice* in fact in this passage, "*I AM* this Bread of Life". It's fascinating that the crowd around him—good Hebrew folk who apparently knew their Bibles—were the ones who made the connection between the feeding of the five thousand and manna in the wilderness. They could both see and understand that his bread was no ordinary bread, and perhaps it had filled something deeper than a fish sandwich can do. They were also the ones who made the connection between Moses and Jesus in the leadership role, mediating between God and the people, interceding on their behalf. So their question to Jesus, on that personal level, was basically this: "We know what Moses did for our ancestors but what can *you* do for *us*? What can you do to *top* Moses?" That's when Jesus drops the big one, lets the secret out and uses the "I AM" language, the significance of which his Jewish audience could not possibly miss. "I AM the Living Bread, your bread for tomorrow, bread forever! It's my life and my flesh that you will feed upon! This bread is the future life and only hope of the world."

John could have ended his gospel right there, and he would have said enough. I mean, theologically, that's got it. The problem, of course, is that human nature being what it insists on being, not too many people in that audience *got the point*. Some wanted to get woodenly *literal* and have a debate on the ethics of cannibalism. Some thought Jesus was maybe getting a little too bold, and even among his own disciples there were some who walked away at this point, says John. Isn't *that* interesting? Sometimes, for some folks, it's not that they can't see the issue *clearly* enough, rather it's

that the truth is *too* clear—too clear to *deny*, too clear to argue with, so all you can do, if you're not coming *in*, is to walk away.

Don't you sometimes wish the Church and all these fine Christian folks in the world could be as direct as Jesus was, and as clear as John was in telling the story? The German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, liked to tell a story from the war years about a hungry man passing by a store that had a sign in the window, "We Sell Bread." He entered the store, put his last few coins on the counter and said, "I would like to buy some bread." The women behind the counter replied, "*We* don't sell bread." "But the sign in the window says you do," the man protested. The woman explained, "Oh no, we just make *signs* here, like the one in the window that says, 'We Sell Bread'. There's a horrible truth in that story. A hungry man can't really eat a sign, and bread can't always be found where it seems to be or even claims to be. Is it possible that some churches are like that store with a fine display of signs, but nothing real to offer, nothing for a hungry person to eat and live forever?"

This Bread of Life that Christ *is* should be immediately recognizable and actually available. The people who need it, need it desperately, and the church and its people ought to be able to put it in their hands.

This story came out of the First World War. A young soldier had been seriously wounded, his torso ripped apart by shrapnel. Amazingly, the surgeons put him back together and he should have been able to survive, except that the psychological wounds were deeper than the physical ones. What he had seen people doing to each other had killed his will to live in such a world, and so he would not eat. They shipped him back across the ocean, to a military hospital a few hundred miles from his home. There a friend from his hometown was also convalescing. He observed the young lad's depression and his refusal to eat, and so he sent word to the lad's parents to come quickly. A week later the young soldier's father arrived. It had been a long arduous journey by ox-cart, too long and difficult for the boy's mother to manage. But she sent something in her place. Wrapped in a linen cloth was a loaf of her homemade bread. When the boy's father approached him, unwrapped that loaf and held it close enough for him to smell it, the miracle was done. He took it and ate. As if in response to the command of Jesus, "Take, eat and live," that boy *ate*, and he *lived*. Where life would have been lost otherwise, *this* bread could change a troubled lad's direction and point him toward new life.

The Bread of Life that Jesus *is* works like that. There's something about his bread that you will recognize. When you see it, you'll know. When you smell it, you'll remember. There's something his bread can do that no other bread can. Something will make you not only want to eat but will make you really want to *live forever*.