

- Until a few years ago, bread would have been one of the most commonly purchased products at a grocery store. But with heightened sensitivity to gluten intolerance, along with concerns about carbohydrates in our diet, many of us eat less bread than we used to. Despite this decline, bread remains an attractive food choice, especially when it is wholesome and well-prepared.
- When I think of wholesome bread, I think of a place thousands of miles from here. In 1978, I spent the month preceding Easter on the island of Crete. Between two university terms in a cold and wet England, the best choice was to head as far south as possible. And I could get to Crete cheaply because I went by bus from London to Athens. I was preparing for Baptism, and I spent my time on Crete camping simply. Basically fasting, on most days I ate only once. That alone would have made my spare meals memorable. But I remember most clearly the bread I bought from a baker near where I camped.
- Fresh from the oven, his oval-shaped loaves were about three inches high and nine inches wide. He scored the dough crosswise before baking it. And so, in my hands, the bread would break into thick, two-inch-wide pieces. With these I ate cheese, tomatoes and cucumber slices, as well as occasional pieces of salami. Those few additions were *not unimportant*. But, most clearly, I remember the fulfilling bread, which kept me going day after day.
- Given that experience, and my spiritual focus in those weeks before Easter, I am mindful of Jesus' edgy words early in Matthew's and in Luke's Gospels. During his temptations, Jesus said to the devil: "*The human being shall not live by bread alone.*" As we consider what he meant by that, we also consider how his words *might have sounded to the poor* in his community. My experience on Crete, gives me a clue about this. For during that time, I

was living primarily on bread. It helps me imagine how, *for people in economically-strained situations, bread alone* can mean the difference between starving and surviving. That's not the case for most people in America today, *where we struggle less for survival* than we do to improve the quality of our lives.

- In light of all this, we should notice *how bread functions as a significant symbol in the Bible.* Bread provides a *central metaphor* for how *God takes care of our needs, and gives us grace and sustenance.* Whether it has gluten or not, bread not only helps us *survive*; bread actually helps us *thrive.* We heard a good example of this in our first reading and our Psalm last Sunday. Those texts speak of *the bread given to Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt.* As Psalm 78 tells us, the people *tested* the Lord by asking, "*Can God spread a table in the wilderness? ... [C]an [God] also give bread... for his people?*" The Psalmist notes God's *fiery*, and yet also *compassionate*, reaction: Though "they had not faith in God, and did not trust his saving power ... he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; [God] *rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.*" And so "*mortals ate the bread of angels; [God] sent them food in abundance.*"¹
- Several biblical images related to the bread of heaven are beautifully illustrated by Peter Koenig. I have put a copy of his painting, *For the Year of the Eucharist* with your worship bulletin. {*You might remember seeing it before.*} On the left arm of the cross, Koenig depicts Elijah asleep, while Queen Jezebel plots his death. After lying down to sleep, *an angel awakens him with a gift of bread*, providing sustenance for his journey. Restored, he then goes on to holy Mt. Sinai, a place associated with seeing God, and the gift of the Covenant. At the center of the cross, *we see Jesus, who is the bread come down from heaven, sharing the bread of life with his friends.* On the right arm, we see *Jesus as the true vine, and his Father as the vinedresser.*

And below, we see how we are the 'ark' of the Church, and we are fed with the bread of life. These few references, chosen by Koenig from among so many in the Bible, remind us of the significance of bread as a gift from God, for the life of the world.

- These insights help us appreciate how, in 1st Samuel, God replaces Saul with David as the King of Israel. God tells the prophet Samuel to go to *Bethlehem*, where he anoints David as God's chosen king. The name *Bethlehem* means 'the house of bread.' Of course, this same house of bread later becomes the birthplace of Jesus.
- In our Gospel today, Jesus speaks the first of his seven symbolic "I am" sayings.² All seven elaborate the root idea common to each of them. They recall what Moses experienced when he learned God's holy name. Because of Moses' anxiety about his own credibility, God revealed to Moses something deeply personal ~ *the divine name*: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" For God "said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'."³ Centuries later, Jesus evokes these words in dialogue with the authorities of his day. And he unmistakably connects himself with God's self-revelation. *Standing in the place of God's glory, in the Temple in Jerusalem*, he says words that provoke his listeners to pick up stones to throw at him. "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am!"⁴
- Jesus says, "I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." We know that mortals ate the bread of angels in ancient times. Yet, Jesus says that they "ate manna in the wilderness, and ... died." Unlike our spiritual ancestors, when we eat the bread of life today, we shall live forever. We eat the bread of life when we gather to give thanks, in the Eucharist. And we partake of the true Vine. In

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every Eucharist, we join our Lord by offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, to his Father, for the life of the world.

- Now, at first, Jesus' teaching may have been too abstract for the disciples and others to appreciate. Jesus implies that *his self-sacrifice will have profound significance in relation to this bread, for the life of the world*. But his meaning was not clear until his resurrection appearances, and especially at the Emmaus inn. *"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."* For *"he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."*⁵
- This is something we all celebrate, every Sunday! The same theme shapes a Collect we use in Lent, in which we pray these words: *"Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."*



Peter Koenig, *A Painting for the Year of the Eucharist*

Notice, in the above image:

Jesus said, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." [the Cross]
Feeding her chicks with her own blood, the pelican symbolizes our Lord feeding us with his own blood.
Elijah sleeps while Queen Jezebel plots his death, and God provides bread for him in the wilderness.
Jesus, who is the bread come down from heaven, shares the bread of life with his friends.
For he is the true vine, and his Father is the vinedresser.
We are the 'ark' of the Church, and we are fed with the bread of life.

John 6:35, 41-51

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

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They were saying, “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?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. **I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.**”

Notes:

¹ See Ps. 78:18-25, in context.

² See in John, “I am the bread of life (6:35;” “I am the light of the world (8:12, 9:5);” “I am the gate (10:7, 9);” “I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14);” “I am the resurrection and the life (11:25);” “I am the way, the truth, and the life {14:6};” “I am the true vine (15:1, 5).”

³ See Exodus 3:13-15, in context.

⁴ See John 8:48-59.

⁵ See Luke 24:13-35.