

Eating God's Word

Genesis 2:8-9; 15-17; 3:4-7; 22-24

John 6:35-51

“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.”

What are we meant to do with the words in this book? According to the vast majority of people living today, the words in the Bible are just words; the story they tell just one story among other more currently compelling stories; the ancient biblical allusions in Western literature, as numerous as the sands on the seashore, now lost on the dwindling population of people who actually read books. Yet we are the community that exists because of these words. They have called us out of our lone selves and into life together. Sunday after Sunday they point to the word that remains unsayable in the world if we do not say it: to God's Word made flesh, God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ.

But how, exactly, do we get from these words in a book to God's Word? By what means or magic do they reveal the God hidden in the syntax of sentences or the turn of a narrative? If “exactly” is your penchant, you can go for the so-called “plain sense” of these words that dictate an ethos and an ethic sedimented in the first century, making the church's speech a cypher for the literal words on the page. Or you can simply borrow the words of the Bible in order to lend authority to what you could have said without them, like preachers who offer up an entertaining word or an ideological word or a psychological word instead of the Word given the church to say so that people may never hunger and thirst again. Presently the community called out and together by God's word is laboring under its own inability to listen, to sustain attention, to wrestle like Jacob at the Jabbok, speaking of a lost allusion, until, at break of day, we are blessed with the name of the God who has wrestled through these words with us. This morning, a rabbi

in Capernaum named Jesus both shows us and tells us that, if we want to get from these words in John's Gospel to God's Word, we must eat the Word that alone can sustain our lives eternally.

Jesus' particularly inscrutable words about eating God's word were said in Capernaum. The ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee were first unearthed in 1866 by a British cartographer named Charles Wilson. Likely the remains represent a 4th century synagogue built over a 2nd century synagogue. When Jesus and the disciples found themselves in Capernaum after a night at sea, you can imagine Jesus rising in the morning to teach on the site of the now ruined synagogue, the local place where God's people gathered to reinterpret the meaning of the law and the prophets for each new generation.

The time, John tells us, is a time very near the Passover. Like us, the Israelites told time by way of the community's telling and retelling of the story of salvation. They marked the year with annual festivals. John located this story just days before or after God's people assembled to eat the unleavened bread and the flesh of an unblemished lamb in remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt. The time, in John's mind, is the time between the Passover feast and the messianic banquet.

Knowing this, we can also know the texts that were being read and reinterpreted by the man the people addressed as "Rabbi" when they found him on the other side of the sea. According to Aileen Guilding, the synagogue's three-year cycle of readings surrounding the Passover were: in Year I, Genesis 1-7, creation to the flood; in Year II, Exodus 9-16, the Passover to the wilderness journey; and in Year III, Numbers 6-14, also the Passover and the wilderness.

If you were here last Sunday, you know that the Exodus text is the most obvious text on Jesus' mind and John's mind too. Moses and the manna are mentioned explicitly, John playing

upon the people's messianic expectations that, in the end times, God's servant again would rain manna from heaven. In teaching the Exodus text anew to the people gathered in the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus counters their interpretation of the words, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat," that have led them to wait for a repeat of Moses and the manna, with an interpretation meant to turn them, through the text, to God's present action. In essence, he tells them not to look for another Moses who will perform a miracle, but to receive, instead, the true bread from heaven that God is giving them now. In response the congregation says, still not understanding, "Sir, give us this [literal] bread always." That is when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life....Whoever eats this bread will live forever...."

I think these must have been the words that started bells ringing in the mind of Guilding and sent her running to look up the lectionary readings for the Sabbaths near the Passover. Just as the sixth chapter of John reverses the Exodus story--Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, his walking on water, and his assurance, on the other side of the sea, that death would not rule God's people ever again, so too, in these enigmatic verses, Jesus reverses the curse of death and the expulsion from the garden pronounced over human beings by God in Genesis. Moreover, each reading from the Torah was paired with a reading from the prophets. So the Genesis reading was paired with a reading about bread and God's word from Isaiah 55 that says, in part, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ...Incline your *ear*, and come to me; *listen* so that you may live....For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven...giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth...."

Rereading the second creation story and Isaiah 55 through Jesus' words in John's sixth chapter, what I noticed as if for the first time was that God created human beings hungry.

Immediately after Adam is formed from the dust, God plants a garden full of trees that are beautiful and good for food; in particular, the text mentions two of those trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You know the rest of the story. Adam and Eve are given carte blanche in the garden save for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest they eat it and die. Why die? Because knowing good and evil is deadly apart from knowing God. But the serpent says to Eve, “You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will become like God, knowing good and evil.” They eat, they know, they hide, they confess, they are punished. Adam is told that, by the sweat of his face, he will eat bread until he returns to the ground. Then God drives them out of the garden and away from the tree of life, lest they eat of that tree and live forever.

Reversing the fall, in the fullness of time, God’s Word made flesh invites God’s people to eat the bread of life, which he is, and live forever. According to Gregory of Nyssa, the Eucharistic bread is an antidote to the forbidden fruit of Eden. To eat the bread is to eat God’s word, a redemptive word here and now, a word that frees us from the dominion of death and a word that begins again with us, a whole new creation. Listen to Jesus’ inscrutable words again!

Quoting from the Isaiah text, Jesus says in the first place, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,” and adds, “which the Son of Man will give you.” God’s word *is* the food! Incline your ear, listen [to the word that goes out from my mouth], Isaiah continues, and you will live! In the words of Scripture and in the Word of God that Jesus is, God sustains the life that death cannot destroy. All other words will perish.

Thinking literally of the bread humankind has worked for from the beginning, the people in the congregation ask what they should do to earn this bread. Jesus says, in the second place,

that the true bread, that comes to them from heaven and gives life to the world, cannot be earned but only received. As with the tree of life, so with the bread of life: take and eat and live.

In the third place, reversing the judgment of God that drove mortals out of the garden, Jesus says he will never drive away any who come to him, any who have been drawn to him by God. The separation that was our choice and God's judgment in the beginning is over forever.

In the fourth place, Jesus says that the bread he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. He assumes our mortality, our death; he is the unblemished lamb sacrificed at the Passover to save God's people; he dies so that death will never again touch us, our destiny in him being the love that knows no end and not the grave.

Finally Jesus returns to Isaiah saying, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall be taught by God.'" The only one who is from God and has seen God has come so that we may know God instead of good and evil. On the Sabbath near the Passover in Capernaum, on the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost in Chestnut Hill, if we incline our ears and come to him and listen that we may live, God will teach us and God's Word will feed us.

In response, the people in the synagogue in Capernaum complained, and so do you. These words sound like nonsense. The claims are unbelievable. Jesus is a man like other man, the son of a father and mother whose names we know. His words about coming from heaven, about living bread, about eternal life are just that: words, words, words. You have come out this morning, just like the Judeans had come to the synagogue, hungry for a tangible, practical word, a word that helps you know good from evil, a word that tells you what you have to do to earn God's favor, a word you can get your mind around. Instead you are given a word to chew on, literally to crunch, eat, swallow, and digest. Take, eat and live.

What are we meant to do with the words in this book? The only way I know to get from these words to God's word is to consume them as though our life depended on them, to wrestle with them for a blessing, to plumb the depths of Scripture with the help of the saints who have gone before us, to incline our ears and listen in these words for God's Word turning our lives toward the love who is making all things new. As was the case then, so it is now that "many drew back and no longer went about with him saying, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'" As was the case then, so it is now that those who incline their ears and listen come to believe this Word alone is life indeed. "Lord," said Peter at the chapter's end, "to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Thanks be to God.