

Elaine Ramshaw – “Bread for the Journey” 8/8/2021

This is the year of the Gospel of Mark, so you may wonder what we’re doing these weeks wandering around in the 6th chapter of John. The truth is that Mark is just too short to get us through an entire year, so a couple of times we take a detour into John, which doesn’t get a whole year of its own (instead, it gets the Easter season every year). So for several weeks in the summer of Mark, we look at various facets of the image of Jesus as the Bread of Life.

Two weeks ago you heard of Jesus feeding the 5000, the only miracle story that is told in every one of the four gospels. In fact, if you throw in the two tellings of the feeding of the 4000, there are actually six of these stories of crowd-feeding in the four gospels. It’s a picture of the great party that God plans to host on a mountaintop at the end of time, the party that we get a tiny preview of here at this table. As Jesus often told stories that ended in great parties, his feeding of the crowd was another picture of the kingdom of God, the picnic of the world.

Last week we heard the story of the Israelites discovering the manna, an image that the Gospel-writer himself uses to point to who Jesus is: the bread of God, Jesus says, is that which comes down from heaven for the life of the world. Or, the Greek sentence can be equally well translated: The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven to give life to the world. Mysterious bread like the manna, which people called “manna” because it sounded like what they said when they first saw the whitish stuff on the ground: What is it? And yet, it tasted good and sweet, and it sustained them, and it came by grace alone: they did not plant or harvest it, they could only gather it up. It came from heaven, they said, meaning that it came from God; yet they found it on the ground. In all these ways, manna is an image of what sort of bread Jesus means when he says, “I am the Bread of Life.” Sweet and sustaining, yet strange, not the sort of food we produce ourselves, a sheer gift, that comes in the now, day by day by day. A gift of life that came from heaven but was found right here, down on the ground, in the wilderness, in our hunger.

Today we hear one more image, in the story of Elijah. Elijah is depressed and hopeless and just wants to give it all up and die. Then the angel comes with bread and water; Elijah eats it, only to lie down again. (That’s my favorite part of the story!) The angel comes a second time, not giving up on Elijah even though he has given up, and nudges him, and says, “Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” So Elijah gets up and eats, and “he went in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.”

This Bread of Life, the word we hear and share, the One who feeds us with his own life so that we live in him and he lives in us—this bread is our manna, and it is also our bread for the journey. When we are tired out or hopeless and can’t see the point of going any farther, what does God do? God does not lecture us, or give us motivational speeches, or yell at us for wasting our opportunities, or threaten us with punishment or abandonment, or get disgusted with us, or give up on us. God comes and feeds us, and

when after eating we lie down again, God comes again and nudges us and feeds us again, providing food that gives us strength to journey on. Elijah went on in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights—and what does “40” mean in Bible-speak? A very long time. As long as the waters of the flood rained down. As long as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. As long as Jesus fasted in the wilderness. As long as it takes, to face what we need to face and fight what we need to fight, until we come through the wilderness to the mountain of God.

Maybe a good contemporary translation of this image of Elijah’s cake baked on hot rocks, his bread for the journey, is that the bread God gives us is our trail mix. Food to sustain us for a long and hard trip, maybe a trip through a wilderness, maybe a trip up a mountain. Food with enough energy to give us strength when our strength fails, so that we can journey, as Elijah did, “in the strength of that food.”

If any of you have read Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, you know another image of bread for the journey. Tolkien’s elves have a secret recipe for lembas or waybread, a bread which tastes good and stays fresh for months when it is kept in its original leaf-wrappings, and is used for sustenance on long journeys. The elves give this waybread to Frodo and Sam, and it is what keeps them alive on their long journey into the heart of darkness to destroy the ring. Tolkien was a believing Christian, of course, a Roman Catholic to whom the Eucharist was very important. He acknowledged in a letter that the waybread bore something like a religious significance. In the books, Tolkien even refers to the pieces of waybread as “wafers.” Here is a passage describing the elves’ waybread:

It had a virtue without which [Frodo and Sam] would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam’s mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.

Without the lembas, the waybread, Frodo and Sam would have lain down to die, just as Elijah did, under the broom tree. The waybread fed the will as well as the body, and gave strength for the journey, even the journey that went on, as Frodo and Sam’s journey certainly does go on, for a very long time.

As Tolkien was well aware, the Eucharist when given to someone who is dying is traditionally called “viaticum,” a Latin term meaning “for the way.” Let me tell you a story about the Eucharist as viaticum. About 35 years ago now, there was a six-year-old Lutheran girl who was dying of a brain tumor. Her pastor had always talked to his congregation about communion as God’s party, as our chance to experience ahead of time just a taste of that wonderful party God will invite all the people of the world to at the end of time. She told him that she wanted to be at God’s party, so with the parents’ permission, he talked with her about the meaning of communion, and she received her first communion with her family not long before she died. The day she slipped into

coma, her last words to her father were, “See you at God’s party.” That’s just what Jesus said to his friends at his last supper with them. When you eat this, remember the future, when we will eat together at the welcome table.

The bread of communion was waybread for this girl, sustaining food for her journey through death to the party on God’s mountain. It was also waybread for her family, over the long, long journey of grief, of sorrow mixed with joyful remembrance, which would last for the rest of their lives. It has been a great comfort and a sustaining hope for her parents to come to the table where we get a foretaste of the feast to come, and to know that they had shared and continue to share in that feast with their daughter seated at their side. They felt in that comfort the truth of what Jesus says in today’s Gospel, that “whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” The bread that sustains us is Jesus, his own life shared with us. And that gift, as John says again and again throughout his Gospel, brings us inside the life of God, a life of mutual love we call Trinity. Jesus abides in us and we abide in him; Jesus abides in God and God abides in Jesus; we are drawn into that mutual abiding in the Spirit, so that we are grapes on the Jesus-vine, so that we become the body of Christ ourselves, full of the life of God, given for the life of the world. It is Jesus who sustains us on our journey, comes to feed us, comes again when we give up again, nudges us and feeds us again and strengthens us and calls us to journey on. And it is the community we become in Christ which sustains us on our journey, the bread-sharing here which gives us a preview of God’s party, and strengthens us to share our bread with a hungry world.

It is a bit sad, and odd, that this summer we hear some of these passages from John about the bread of life without being able to come immediately to the table. Last year many of us went for months without being able to receive the bread of communion. The disruptions of our worship life in this time are one more difficult journey which often makes us feel like we are lost in the desert, wandering in the wilderness. Yet the bread of life is here for us today, and has been here for us throughout our desert wandering, because the bread of God is not only *that which* comes down from heaven—it is *the one who* comes down from heaven to give life to the world. Jesus himself is our bread, and Jesus is, as Rev. Mary said last week, *right in front of us*, right here, offering us himself, God’s life given freely, shared with the world. “Here I am,” Jesus says. “I am the bread of life.” Here for you when you lose heart. Get up, eat, or the journey will be too much for you. Only in the strength of this food will we make our way to the mountain of God.

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