

Rev Mary Barnett – “Bread of Life” 8/1/2021

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15 | John 6:24-35

The OT for today is from Exodus, the Glory of God is in a cloud and the people are way, way, way, way, way down below. They have survived 7, 8, or 10 plagues depending on how you count them. They have escaped from slavery in Egypt, crossed through the Red sea and seen the chariots and chariot drivers of their enemies swept away. But now, they are wandering in the wilderness and they have been wandering for a long, long time now. Every time they think the answer is over the next sand dune, their hopes are dashed. And they are tired and they are hungry and they are frustrated. They have had to leave precious things and precious people behind. And so they are grief stricken. Although some of them are just plain mad: maybe because sometimes being mad lets you feel stronger and less vulnerable than feeling sad and afraid. Understandably, they are critical of Moses and some days every little thing gets under their skin. In any case, right now, they are grumbling.

Why have you brought us out here where there is nothing good? Where there is no food like we are used to? Where things aren't like they were before? Where everything is different and what we used to rely on is gone? We don't even feel like the same people anymore! Moses, but leading is out of ourselves you've destroyed who we once were. This was all your idea. It would be better if we had never ventured out into this wilderness at all but had stayed in Egypt even if we were going to die a slow death there, at least we would have died in a world we understood, with our bellies full!

I can imagine Moses sitting on a rock somewhere with his head in his hands contemplating early retirement.

God...says Moses I don't think I want to do this anymore! These people don't believe in me, they don't trust me, some of them don't even trust that I am trying to follow YOU, some of them even think I've cooked all this up on my own for my own gratification! God, don't they know: I'm in the wilderness too?

Thankfully, the Lord is faithful: he hears Moses and his people. And in the morning, the very next morning the earth is covered with a fine white powder that looks... like frost, but isn't. Of course, it *doesn't look* like food in the least and so the people walk right over it. Still grumbling.

But some new guy nobody recognizes...some straggler, way over in the back corner, looking after the livestock, scoops some up in his palm and tastes it.

Hey, this is good! he says.

And the people finally look down at their feet. Their sandals are covered with this stuff. But what is it? Of course some people will refuse to try it.

How do we know for sure this is food? It could be dangerous. It could carry disease. My great grandfather died from eating something white someone says!

And they close in on themselves, they close rank and well... some of them do die.
But way over there, a child calls out with joy.

Wow she says. This stuff is weirdly delicious. It fills my belly. It tastes like wafers made with coriander and honey.

And eventually they gather it up by the arm load. They decide to trust this gift they have been given. And they eat of it. They eat of it and find sustenance from it, even though it is different, even though they aren't sure what they will feel like afterwards or what the unintended consequences may be, even though no one, not even Moses can predict the future. Even though there is always a risk involved. They trust their leader. And they trust God and they trust this gift in its strange packaging. Even though this gift does not look like what they wanted. And it does not look like something they have ever wanted before. They trust it and they ingest it and it nourishes them and it helps them survive and that is enough. And so they are able to continue on their way, into the wilderness of the future, where nothing will be exactly like it was before... ever.

This made me think of so many things this week as did the Gospel story it is paired with:

In John's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples have finished feeding the 5,000 and as night falls they have managed to slip away from the crowd. They have made their way independently across the sea to Capernum. I imagine they are all looking for some space... some alone time, some R & R. Feeding 5,000 people with 5 loaves and two fish must take a lot out of a person, whoever you are. And Jesus and the disciples need some rest.

But the crowd is frantic.

Where did they go, why have they left us, It's morning and we are hungry again!

And the crowd follows them all the way across the sea. They spy Jesus walking up a hill.

Jesus! Jesus! they call... Wait up! How did you do that, Jesus? How did you feed 5,000 people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish?! We need to know! Show us again so that we might really believe in you this time.

And Jesus keeps walking but says over his shoulder,

Look, you are merely looking for more bread! The real miracle is the miracle you don't recognize. The one you are trampling underfoot with your bellyaching. This the bread which is eternal which will not only fill your bellies but save your life.

Well...maybe, they say. But that's a bit of a stretch, isn't it? We aren't sure about that. A good breakfast would be nice.

And Jesus keeps walking.

Hey, Jesus...wait up....you've got to admit: That was pretty amazing what you did w the bread back there, right? Give us another sign like that! So that we might REALLY trust you Yes, like the way the people finally learned to trust Moses in the wilderness 12 centuries ago, in the old story, when Moses gave them that flaky stuff to eat: what was it called...

And Jesus says,

That wasn't Moses. It was God. And that wasn't just bread but eternal life. Life, Life, Life! For this community and for the whole world.

And there is some silence while they tried to digest *that*.

Ok ok they say finally. We get it. That's the ticket. That is what we want. Give it to us.

And Jesus takes a big deep breath (Father help me he says under his breath.) And then turns and looks at them. ***I am the bread of life he says, reaching his cupped hands forward as if in offering. And His offering mirrors exactly what we do when we reach up our hands for the Eucharist. The Body of Christ. The bread of heaven. And that is how close Jesus is to us today. And each and every day.***

I had an experience this week: an ordinary experience, on a very ordinary not so great, kind of bad day. I was in a very ordinary kind of bad mood: my husband was working 24/7 and my kids had other things going on and even my babysitter seemed to be getting on better with the dog and my shoulder had started hurting again and as I walked into my PT appointment I was getting a bit grumbly. And then it seemed I was kind of routinely ignored by my physical therapist, who seemed to have other better clients and more important things to do and walking home I felt SO flustered and out of sorts. *Where can I get what I need? I thought, How can I shake this mood!*

I felt as if my mind was literally flipping around inside my head, trying to find something solid to hold onto. I imagined reaching up vertically to God but... nuthin. I looked for beauty but... cars were whizzing past.. nuthin. I imagined reaching out horizontally to my wonderful family and friends but I couldn't quite latch on. I kept coming up empty handed. As if I was grasping at straws. I was so completely frustrated with myself, that I shut my eyes for a second...

Jesus! I muttered under my breath.

And then there he was. Right in front of me.

I am the bread of life he said.

And I landed.

Maybe that is why I was so moved later in the week, when I heard that Simone Biles had stepped down from Olympic competition after losing her way on a backward flipping vault with two and a half twists in mid-air. Can you imagine attempting something like that?? And yet in small ways, ways with way less immediate risk to life and limb, haven't we all been there at some time or other: lost in the air, flipping around, grasping at straws?

Biles wrote on Instagram, "*At the end of the day, where we are human too so we have to protect our mind in our body rather than just go out there and do what the world wants us to do.*"

Flying off the vault or swinging on the uneven bars, Simone found herself in the wilderness, not knowing where she was, or what mattered most, or where she was going, or when she would get there or how to right herself and something or Someone, told her it was OK to stop.

It was OK to stop and to save herself. And that was enough.

That voice broke through the performance she was stuck in and gave her back to herself.

We recognize that as the voice of Jesus. Jesus told her she mattered, her own imperfect, precious, singular human self: not what she produces, or how much money she makes, or how much money she might lose, or what people might say, or how many eyes were focused on her, or how important the games are to the economy of Japan, or how many people the world over might be disappointed or angry or outraged.

He just stood right in front of her as he stands right in front of us every day.

I am the bread of life, he said.

And she ate.

Amen