

## “Preservatives”

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

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As I was preparing for this week’s sermon, I had one of those random thoughts that you sometimes have. I was reading our gospel passage for today and I read Jesus’ words about working for food that endured to eternal life, and I wondered what Jesus’ audience must have thought about that at the time. The whole concept of food that won’t spoil must have been kind of an odd thought for them. Even for us today, we’re certainly aware of the fact that most food can go bad pretty quickly, especially in the right conditions, but we have so many more ways to preserve food today than they did back then. We have refrigeration and freezing and canning and vacuum-sealing, not to mention all the chemical preservatives we add to many things. A store-bought loaf of bread will stay soft and fresh and flavorful for quite a bit longer than a homemade loaf of bread because of preservatives.

They had some food preservation techniques in ancient times — drying or salting or storing something in oil or wine or honey — but a lot of the techniques they had were expensive or time-consuming or just not always practical. And I don’t know how much of a difference the climate would make, if food doesn’t spoil as quickly in a Mediterranean climate as it does on a humid August day in the Poconos. But getting food was much more of a daily concern for people in most of human history, and if it wasn’t a daily concern, it was certainly a seasonal one. If the rains don’t come at the right time to grow your crops, or if a plague strikes your herds, you faced the legitimate fear of starvation within a matter of months. You didn’t have canned food in your pantry to fall back on if your garden failed, and if there was a serious drought or plague in the right place, there might not be food for *anyone*. The concept of just not really having to worry about food, and not having to worry about your food going bad and making you sick or leaving you hungry, probably would have been something that most of the people in Jesus’ audience simply couldn’t have imagined.

It’s definitely a strange sort of conversation. You get the sense as you read it that communication just isn’t happening like it’s supposed to. Jesus is trying to give them a message, and the people in the crowd are working at understanding, but their minds are just not going in the direction Jesus is leading. It’s the sort of thing that can happen when folks can’t get past their own expectations and experiences, when Jesus is trying to push them to go deeper but they’re just not willing to follow. As so often happens when dealing with the kingdom of God, Jesus is calling them to something that lasts, and they’re stuck on temporary concerns that will spoil. Jesus is pointing them toward eternity, while they can’t get their minds off of their daily bread.

It’s a perennial problem for us. We’re so used to living in a universe governed by entropy and futility and spoilage. We’re used to worrying and planning and wondering if there will be enough and if it will last. That’s just how the world works, as far as we understand it. It’s one of the most basic laws of science as we know it, that in any closed system, the entropy or disorder of the system will increase with time, and so there is always at least some inefficiency and wasted energy somewhere along the way. But Jesus is pointing us to a renewed world in which God is the most fundamental reality. I think many people don’t have a problem with that basic concept; we all love the thought of heaven or an afterlife or something where everyone has enough and everything is happy all the time. But the problem is how to get there, how to become a part of that reality, how to enter that kingdom.

It's been a problem for a very long time. It's the problem facing God and His people in our first reading, the passage from Exodus 16 that gives us the story of the manna and the quail. The setting for the story is that God has just set His people free from four hundred years of slavery through a cosmic showdown with the false gods of Egypt during which God was the complete and total victor. We really cannot overstate what a pivotal moment this was. It was just as important to the future of this people as our Revolutionary War was to us, just as dramatic and inspiring as D-Day, just as liberating as the Civil War was for American slaves. And after God saved them from slavery, He made them into a nation of people by giving them a land to live in and a special relationship with God to shape them. The Exodus from Egypt was just as defining in the religion of the Hebrews as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are to Christians.

But after that Exodus came the journey through the desert, during which these former slaves have to learn how to stop being slaves to Egypt's king and learn how to be the chosen people of God instead. The learning curve was pretty steep, and they fell off quite often. As is true for many of us, most of their worst moments come when they're hungry or thirsty. They're out in the desert, this huge mass of people with a limited number of animals, so their resources are scarce. They begin to grumble and worry about what they're going to eat, and they wonder whether they were better off in slavery, where at least they could count on that daily bread. And so God gives them this food called manna, a miraculous bread that appeared each day and fed them for that day.

Something I had never noticed before when I've read this story in the past is how God describes what He's doing and why He's doing it. "In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions," God says. He's not feeding them just because they need food. God could do that any number of ways. No, He is giving them enough food for that one day, every day, as a test. They are instructed to gather what they need for that day and that day only, and anything beyond that they try to hoard will be maggot-eaten and inedible. So it's not just a way to feed them, it's a way to test them and see whether they really trust God, and more than that, over time it's a way of teaching them to trust God. As the manna comes every day, day after day, they will learn that they don't need to live in that old economy of hoarding and worrying about whether there will be enough. There will always be enough, because they're trusting in their God who is faithful.

And that story is part of the background of the conversation we read about in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has just used five loaves of bread and two fish to miraculously feed five thousand men and their families, with basketfuls of leftovers. All throughout His ministry, a lot of what Jesus did demonstrated that His arrival fulfilled or completed a lot of the expectations and promises from the past. He was making it clear that if you wanted to know what the real meaning was of God's law, or the real meaning of the manna in the wilderness, or any of those other stories of God's faithfulness in the past, look to Jesus. So here you have an exciting, controversial figure like Jesus who just might be the promised Messiah to finally save God's people, and He is performing this massive sign of miraculous bread in the wilderness, and everyone would naturally make the connection to that manna all those generations before.

But as He so often does, Jesus short circuits their expectations. They're thinking in terms of food and how nice it would be to have more of that kind of thing, but Jesus is pointing them back to the reality that the manna was really about testing their trust in God. He calls them out for the fact

that they're really following Him around because of the free bread He gave them the other day, and then He sort of gradually circles in toward the real point. "Why are you spending your time and energy for bread that will spoil?" He asks them, in essence. "Why not spend that energy on bread that will last for eternity?"

You see, in their minds, they had come for eternal bread. They thought, "If we just find the right Messiah and follow Him around, He'll have the power or the authority or the magic or the ability to keep giving us bread, and we'll be set for life! We'll have all the bread we need." But Jesus is saying to them that no, your focus is still on bread that spoils. There's something better. Being full today is fine; there's nothing wrong with that. But even better is being satisfied for eternity. And if that's an option, why bother spending time and energy on what spoils?

Maybe Jesus is subtly pointing them to the fact that, when it came to the manna God gave them all those years ago, the food that spoiled was the food they hoarded. In other words, food that spoils is the fruit of disobedience to God, while it's obedience to God that lasts for eternity. The crowd seems to start following Jesus a little bit, but they're still not there. They ask what they think is a better question: "What must we do to do the works God requires?" They've made a step forward in spiritual maturity: they've moved from wanting God to take care of their physical, daily needs to wanting to be obedient to God. But still, they're not where Jesus wants them. They haven't come to the bread that won't spoil, because a works-based relationship with God simply won't last; we just can't do enough good things on our own.

Jesus says that no, it's not about doing things to satisfy God, it's about believing that Jesus is God's anointed one: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent." You can do good things without really being loyal to the right person. So they ask Him for a sign to prove that He is the one they should believe in, and as an example, they suggest more bread. They want this bread from heaven that Jesus keeps talking about, and they ask Him to "always give us this bread." They want the neverending stream of daily bread, but Jesus is offering them bread that will not spoil. Eternal bread and neverending bread are not the same thing: eternal bread has a divine quality to it, while neverending bread would spoil if you didn't eat it fast enough.

And so Jesus tries to spell it out for them: "I am the bread of life," He says. He's been circling around this point all along, trying to lead them to the truth that what they need is not what God can give them, what they need is the presence of God Himself. The manna in the wilderness was not about daily bread, it was about trusting in the presence of the God who gave it to them. The bread of life that is Jesus is not about getting stuff from God, it's about feeding from the nearness of Jesus who gives life.

It is God Himself that we desire; it is God Himself that we need. This conversation between Jesus and the crowd almost diagrams what we might consider a maturing of a person's walk with God. We often will begin our journey toward God from a basic concern for what God can give us, asking for things that we need. We come to Him out of a crisis or a sense of lostness, looking for what He can give us. And that's not bad, necessarily; Jesus instructs us to ask for "our daily bread." Often we will grow a bit, and we'll be concerned with what works we should do for God. We move from a needs-based faith to a guilt-based faith, where I feel bad if I'm not doing what God wants me to do. And again, that's not completely bad; we need to obey God. But there's something beyond that.

There's bread that is eternal, that will never spoil, and that bread is Jesus Himself. The goal is to grow to know the Giver so well that we don't need to worry about the gifts. We know that we're just with our good Lord, and He will provide all we need, and all we desire is Him.

It's a maturing process that we see all throughout our spiritual lives, in service, in prayer, in worship, and in study. We tend to move from a concern for what I get out of this, to what do I need to do, to just enjoying the presence of God in our spiritual practices. So the question to you today is this: what bread are you looking for? Are you fixated on bread that spoils, or are you satisfied with nothing less than eternal bread?



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