“Bread: Part Three”

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John 6:51-58

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***51I 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.” 52The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”***

“First sentences are doors to worlds,” wrote [Ursula Le Guin](https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/19975/ursula-le-guin) in her essay *The Fisherwoman’s Daughter*.  When a story begins, “Once upon a time…you come to expect a certain type of story. When a story begins “It was a dark and stormy night…” you come to expect a different type of story. I don’t know if it was an English assignment or a party trick to memorize first lines, like “Call me Ishmail.” (Moby Dick) and “It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.” (1984) or “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” (A Tale of Two Cities)

But when a story begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” one might not know *what* to expect. If you were living in first century Palestine when you heard this you might travel in your mind immediately to the first line of your own religious scripture to Genesis, “In the beginning…” It is said that this is exactly what the author of John’s gospel was hoping for. In that way, he (because it probably was a he) was able to differentiate his message from other gospel writers right from the start. Each gospel account in the bible begins in a way that will lead the reader to the author’s main reason for writing, to the outcome they want the readers to see.

**Matthew** begins with a chronology, declaring Jesus to be legitimately from the line of Abraham and David. (Biologically legitimate)

**Mark** begins with Isaiah declaring that Jesus was the expected Messiah, foretold in earlier scripture. (Scripturally legitimate)

**Luke** begins like a reporter begins, out to set out the story in order beginning before Jesus, with John the Baptist.

**John’s** gospel begins as it does, immediately bringing to mind the God of creation in Genesis, in order to declare the deity of Jesus. If you’re going to declare a person to be God, you’ll have to be very creative with your word usage. You’ll have to say things that will invite the listener to think well beyond the literal meaning. The other gospel writers do this by way of parables. John’s gospel does not have any parables, instead using metaphors.

Many of these metaphors come during the part of the writing that is considered the author’s interpretation of events that are in all of the other gospels. For example, the feeding of the 5,000 is a miracle that is recorded in all four of the gospels, but only in the gospel of John do we have the equation of Jesus and bread, with Jesus saying “I am the bread of life.”

And there lies the phrase that seemed so innocent when we began this month. The scripture for today contains the most graphic and visceral interpretation of what Jesus means, when we read Jesus’ words: “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Flesh. At least when we were only talking about “manna” we could just talk about it as nourishment. Manna was something we could only guess what it actually was in real life, so turning it into a metaphor was easy, maybe even expected. But we know what flesh is, so when Jesus says the bread that he will give is his flesh, turning Jesus’ words into a metaphor isn’t as easy. Of course the Jews then disputed among themselves. I might say what they said, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

In his explanation to this question, Jesus uses the words flesh *and* blood together four times. Flesh and blood together, the stuff of life. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you **eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood**, you have no life in you. Those who **eat my flesh and drink my blood** have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for **my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink**. Those who **eat my flesh and drink my blood** abide in me, and I in them.

This was problematic for the Jews at the time, of which Jesus was also, for several reasons. Not only was it an outlandish cannibalistic statement about flesh, but secondly, the Levitical purity laws strictly prohibited the ingesting of anything with blood in it. The other thing they disputed among themselves was Jesus talking about eternal life and living forever. This was a lot for them to take in. This was all brand new to them.

*Not* being brand new to us, we can’t help but read our own understanding and tradition into these words and hear elements from the Lord’s Supper in these words about eating Jesus’ body and drinking Jesus’ blood. We also hear elements of our understanding of the Resurrection when we read about eternal life and being raised up on the last day.

The gospel of John does not have its own version of the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Instead John chapters 13-17 describe a meal with his disciples, and a foot washing, extended teachings and a long prayer. The Lord’s Supper ritual that we use in our worship service is a combination of the descriptions in the first three gospels and these words from today’s text.

Today’s text invites us to take a close look then at the words of the Lord’s Supper, outside of the actual sacrament.

I ate breakfast at my mom’s last week and had a bowl of Life cereal. I thought to myself, what a great marketing idea it was to name the cereal Life. How better to start your day than ingesting a spoonful of life every morning. As a sacrament, not a cereal, we symbolically take in Jesus’ blood and body every time we partake.

What might run through our minds then as we take the bread of communion? What does it mean to “eat?” What we eat, in general, fuels everything about our body and determines our physical health. When we eat the bread at the communion table, we are saying that we are eating, or taking in that which will fuel every part of our non-physical lives and will determine our non-physical health. Our spiritual lives, fueled by this type of eating leads to a life of strong values and ethical standards, service to and for others, all the things modeled and taught by Christ. Eating, taking it all in, chewing, swallowing – all the ways we take in all of Christ’s teachings, chew on it a little and come to an understanding about it, and swallowing it and letting it determine our motivations and actions. Every time I eat this bread I am promising again to let the Spirit of Christ work in me through my thoughts and actions. I am acknowledging that I am hungry for the Word that will lead me so I eat this bread.

What might run through our minds when we drink the cup of communion? Maybe just like chewing and swallowing, we wash it down with the cup. When I eat without drinking it’s hard to get the food down, or it feels dry, or it gets stuck in my throat. What if just like the drink of a meal, the drink of communion is the thing that seals the promise of the bread deep within us. I follow this bread with the cup because I recognize that I am thirsty for the knowledge and love and grace offered by the One who has given me this bread and this cup. Maybe the bread is the prayer, and the cup is the Amen. The bread is the promise and the cup is the commitment to that promise. There are many ways to see the bread that represents Christ’s body and the cup that represents Christ’s blood act together to bring us into a mutual participation with Christ, in the creating of the new covenant that Christ has promised.

We have a beautiful song that is often sung during communion called “Eat this Bread.” Many of you know it already. I’d like to ask you to turn to hymn 527 in the hymnal and sing together, this song. If you know it already, perhaps you can sing the first version with words as if Christ is singing this to you, maybe with your eyes closed if you feel inclined. Let’s sing this three times.

(singing)

Amen.