

August 1, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby  
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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 & John 6:24-35

In the earliest days of the pandemic, there were three things that stores around the country couldn't seem to keep in stock: hand sanitizer, TP, and bread flour. It seemed that many folks, newly confined to their homes, were now interested in baking bread from scratch. And in our developing "attention economy," that also meant that the internet was full of these perfect pictures of loaves of bread, some tiny and some massive, some looking like a monster was growing out of the loaf pan – but homemade bread was everywhere.

Of course, making bread is one of the oldest human activities. It's so old that bread making predates agriculture – there are some archeological sites in modern-day Israel that are from 22,000 years ago, showing hunter gatherers collected wild grains, ground them, and cooked the mash over open flames.<sup>1</sup> So, when the world seems unfamiliar, it's only natural to return to a task that is one of our oldest.

One of the main innovations in bread making was the discovery of fermentation – allowing the dough to rise into loaves, rather than remaining a thin flatcake. There are several sites around the ancient world that are thought to have discovered fermentation around the same time, including Egypt. Indeed, one of the reasons that Egypt was able to grow into a formidable empire in the ancient world was its grain economy. The Nile river is a perfect place for planting grains, and so the Egyptians used grain as its standard of currency. In other words, "dough" was literal money. Working for the state earned you bread from the state bakers, which you could trade for anything else you needed with merchants – and because there was so much fertile land, each family could grow their own garden or directly compete by growing wheat and barley, if they so desired. The Nile river valley also forms a perfect place for airborne yeast to gradually settle down – and the Egyptians brewed beer and baked bread using these natural yeasts. They even

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<sup>1</sup> For comparison's sake, agriculture is thought to have begun around 12,500 years ago. That means we're at least as far now from the invention of agriculture as the inventors of agriculture were from the invention of bread baking.

developed the practice of offering bread and beer to the statues of their gods – breaking bread and pouring out beer on the ground, for the idol to eat. This practice, called “libation,” is the ancient origin of the practice of pouring out an extra glass for those who have passed on.

So, when Genesis tells us that Joseph’s family went down to Egypt to find bread – this is why. If they had enough for their statues, surely they could spare some for people! And in our story this morning, we see the Israelites in the wilderness, suddenly bereft of bread. Of the stuff that was needed to live – both for eating and for trading. When the white flaky stuff that fell from the sky at God’s command was discovered to be able to bake into bread, it must have felt at first like it was raining dollar bills.

But then, Moses tells them God’s commandment – only take what you need for a day, or two on the day before the Sabbath. Anyone who collected more of the stuff than they could use found that it quickly rotted away – taking their dreams of profit and trade. The bread from heaven, this manna stuff, is not being provided for personal profit. God is instead saying, “I will care for the whole of the community, not just for some to get rich. Trust me to provide for you, as I have promised.”

About fifteen hundred years later, the descendants of the people who had been slaves in Egypt and were now oppressed by Rome, these children of God received another miracle of bread for their community. From five loaves and two fish, over 5000 people were fed, with enough for themselves and twelve baskets leftover. In the first century, bread was no longer used as a currency, but people were just as hungry for nourishment as they have always been.

Hearing of the miraculous feast, Jesus was pursued around the lake – to the point that even when he showed up on the other side, people pursued him relentlessly. These people were hungry, kept starving by a foreign power that didn’t care about their way of life or wellbeing – and here was a local man who was giving them food! But when they asked him for free food, he told them, “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which

the Son of Man will give you.”

Aha! Food that doesn't go bad – that you can store forever! Wow, what a deal. What do we have to do to earn this food? Surprise – Jesus tells them (and us) that there's no work involved – you can't earn the bread of heaven. Instead, it is God's work.

“Ok, sure – but remember how Moses gave people bread? Could you maybe do the same, and give us bread, this imperishable bread? It's written, “he gave them bread from heaven to eat.” But Jesus told them, “The “he” in that quote is not Moses, but God, my Father, who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus goes on to tell the crowds that “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 abide in me, and I in them.” In all the gospels, this is the only time before the passion and crucifixion that Jesus explicitly loses disciples for things he says. “This teaching is difficult,” they say, “Who can accept it?” – and “because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

These words out of John's gospel were used by Romans, too, in order to “prove” that the early followers of Jesus, these “Christians,” were cannibals, who feasted on the body and blood of their savior. Of course, they left out a very important line, when Jesus tells the people, “Does this offend you? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” You see, of course, that Jesus is speaking of the communion feast, wherein we spiritually participate in his life, death, and resurrection by eating “the body” of the bread, and “the blood” of the grapes, as wine or juice.

Great – we have our Lord of the Loaf, and Life in the Vine. Spiritually, we are bringing the substance of Jesus and making it a part of our own substance. We are showing that we are one with Christ, every time we take communion together. And while we may not take communion daily, many of us pray the Lord's Prayer

each day, asking God to “give us this day our daily bread.” As often happens in English, especially in older translations, we’re missing some of the nuance of the Greek here.

“Give us this day our daily bread” comes from the King James Version of the Bible – and in 1611, it was a decent translation that agreed with the Latin version that most people had been taught. The particular word for “daily,” in this prayer is only used twice in all of Greek literature – in Matthew and Luke’s gospels, in the Lord’s prayer. The word is *epiousios* – and it is a compound word, consisting of the parts, “epi-” (meaning “over”, or “on top of”) and “ousios” (meaning “substance”, “essence”, or even “stuff”). “Give us this day our daily bread” is meant to be something like, “give us today the super-essential bread,” or “breadstuff of the above,” or even, “bread on top of our being.” It’s a lot more nuanced than just the bread we need each day!

And, as some of you may remember what Pastor Elana taught us a few years ago – that the English word “Lord” derives from an Old English word that meant “warden of the loaves.” *Hlafweard* – the one who keeps the bread safe to distribute at the end of the day. Jesus is Lord – Jesus is the bread and the distributor. Instead of people bringing bread to the divine, the divine brings bread to the people, whether physically as in the manna, or spiritually at the communion table. Instead of a libation being poured out to the divine, the divine has poured out life for us, allowing us to be part of God’s eternity. Truly, Jesus is Loaf, Lord, and Libation, providing us with food to nourish our bodies and our souls, and enough life to live each day not for ourselves alone, but for all of God’s beloved children. Amen.