

**“Bread Part I: The Faith Contract”**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - 8.1.21 - Exodus 16 & John 6:24-38/B**

I want to go HOME!!! Through tears, the little one cries out in fear or frustration, hunger or weariness. And every one of us can relate. We're tired, we're lonely, we're burned out. And we really just want to go home: to the familiar. To the comfortable clothes and shoes, and the cool (or warmth) of our favorite sanctuary. We want the folks who love us unconditionally and we want to be out of the current mess we're in...*again*. HOME becomes the one word that sums it all up: the smell of cookies baking. Or a turkey roasting. Or someone's familiar cologne hanging in the air. Ah, home...

It's no wonder the Israelites - who had just escaped slavery in Egypt - forgot about the miraculous parting of the Red Sea so they could get away from Pharaoh who was in hot pursuit. You can forgive them, if you imagine the hasty departure (leaving everything behind), the race against time in the night, and the terror of the chariots so close behind. But they made it out! To the freedom to worship as they wished. To the Promise of a Land flowing with milk and honey. To finally being able to live lives on their own terms. But they were tired. They remembered what had been their "home" for generations. They could smell the onions and leeks boiling in the soup pot and the melons and pomegranates fresh from tree and vine. "I wanna go *HOME!*" they said, somehow missing the irony of the human experience - for it seems we like to think that we *want* to go back - even if the good old days were not so good. And the "Back to Egypt" Committee formed their agenda and started a petition against Moses - he who had brought them to this desert to die.

Well, you know what happened then. When they were faithful to God - God fed them and led them. When they forgot who they were following, all sorts of calamities befell them on account of their own faithlessness. So, what about the God who provides and protects and loves us with mercy and compassion? Where was that God as they whined their way across the sand? Watch Out, now! Because right there is where many of us take, have taken, or will take a wrong turn, thinking: **I just didn't have enough faith...** Let's clear that up right now with the words of Jesus, "*If you have faith the size of a mustard seed...*" Mustard seed-size faith is all that is needed. And every baker knows that even a small amount of yeast causes all of the bread dough to increase in size exponentially.

Miraculous manna in the desert. Miraculous bread on the hillside. What does this have to do with faith? Well, last week we heard about The Feeding of the 5,000, and now we have 3 more weeks to explore bread and what Jesus had to say about it in John's Gospel - just a little sermon series that nourishes better than multi-grain, because it is a metaphor for how God is feeding our faith.

Today's reading from Exodus tells about God's people, out in the wilderness, being fed by God on **manna** (you know the story...) Now, imagine that you are among Jesus' folks who lived the faith metaphor that manna represents: you have to collect it every day. You can only gather your own, unless there's someone who depends on you to do the gathering. It doesn't keep overnight. There is never too much of it. There is always enough of it. But here's what happens: God provides miraculous food and we get hooked into the *how* of it all. We just can't help critiquing and second-guessing and yes, even complaining about the way God provides and we forget to be curious about *why* God provides. Shouldn't we ask *what?*

**What is it** that we are doing in this desert?

**What is it** that you are saying to me today, God?

**What is it** that you want from me and my life?

Today, Jesus is just helping us understand that it's not about baked dough at all. He was introducing us all to a whole new thing - something that was not just about hunger, but much more about life. Jesus is pretty clear what he wants from us when he says in verse 29, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

Last Sunday, I told you what was coming for the next three weeks of BREAD - or, in metaphor - FAITH. I said, "I'm going to stop talking in shorthand. I'm going to be as deeply truthful as I can be as I share with you how God has changed my life and can change yours. I'm going to talk about faith: which is not just believing that there IS a God, but believing that Jesus IS who he says he IS; and that the words he spoke and the way he lived among us was God's way of **showing us** a different way to be. Faith is saying YES to all of that, and following." So, as Pastor Anteneh says, "*here it comes.*"

When you open yourself to Jesus, who he was, what he taught, and what he did, you cannot avoid The Contract - his invitation to "Follow Me" in a profound and life-altering way. So, let me ask you to reflect on this question, "When did **you** decide that Jesus was **your** Savior?" Some of us would say we never remember NOT believing (having faith.) But I hear your stories and I would say that somewhere along the line each and every one of us has - as our evangelical friends put it - "*made a decision for Christ.*" Yep, somewhere in your life you realized that you **actually believed** what you had been told by the people who cared about you the most: your parents and grandparents; your elders, teachers; your role models.

You said to yourself, **I actually believe in God.** And Jesus. And that amazing Holy Spirit. I believe - not just because they told me to - but because I can **feel** that it is right. I have seen it and experienced it in my life. I've watched faith in action and know in my heart what is truth. And in that moment, you signed *The Contract*. In that moment, you sealed the covenant that God made with you in Baptism. In that moment, you accepted Jesus as your Savior, your friend, your Rabbi. In that moment, you might even have felt the overwhelming *presence* of God's Holy Spirit. Can you recall it? Or are you still seeking that kind of clarity?

\*\*I want to help you find that place where you KNOW that the home that you are yearning for is the place where God abides forever and for always. I want you to feel God's presence, and surrender your burdens and stand before him as if you just received the greatest gift of freedom you can imagine: I want you to get grace, another chance, a new beginning. I want you to receive *new life*.

Then - and only then - can you stop feeling guilty about not having enough faith, or not praying enough. You can put away any negative feelings when I talk about the needs of the world God loves, because you will be touched by that love in your heart - you won't have to make it up or take responsibility because it is your "Christian duty" - you will simply follow Jesus into places you've feared to go before (because you were considering that journey alone) and now you are traveling in tandem.

The ancient Christian mystic, St. Augustine, wrote "*Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Thee.*" Folks, we are born hungry and thirsty. We will always want more, and complain about what we do not have. We want to be in control of life and have power over others. We simply cannot surrender any part of what we are, and have, not even to the grace-filled and loving God who created us at first. I understand. It's hard not to have our own way. But I tell you, we will sell out when we are tempted as Jesus was. We will still

hunger - yet we can choose to be stewards of our hunger - to respond to our deep yearnings like we actually are the children of God, learning to bring our hunger and thirst and longings to the One who has fashioned those very desires **so that** we might come to him...not ashamed of **not** being whole. For *"blessed are those who take refuge in him."*

That phrase was running through my mind yesterday as I was writing, but I couldn't recall where (or even if) it appears in the Bible. So I Googled it. (It happens!) Turns out it is from the Psalms. Psalm 34 to be exact. Verse 8. The verse begins, *"Taste and see that the Lord is good; and blessed are those who take refuge in him."* I was very familiar with the first half - the "Taste and See" part - it has its own hymn in the ELW. But I don't know that I ever noticed the second half until it came into my head from some recollection that was unhooked from its source. Now here's the cool part, which I share simply to illustrate how God is ever present to those who are open to it. As I read the whole Psalm, especially verses 1-8, I thought they would be a great Psalm for next Sunday's Hymn of Praise. So, I downloaded it and pasted it into my notes for next week. Then I looked up to see what was appointed. Psalm 34. Verses 1-8. God has been messin' with me like that for a while now. And I like it.

When we hear Jesus say today, ***I AM the Bread of Life***, we can feel the crowd's desperate yearning for something like "home" as they respond, *"Sir, give us this bread always."* And while we know there is always more where that came from - that God is never depleted, never without more love - perhaps today we might begin to thank God for the hunger and thirst that draws us in to Jesus' life. We might even consider renewing our covenant with God, and forgetting about the life we had in Egypt.

They only had five loaves and two fish, and the disciples didn't think that would be enough to feed 5,000 people. But Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now, when Jesus says, "sit down," he is either going to teach you - or feed you. Or both. So, best do what he says... and I promise you, you will be blessed. Amen.

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**Resources:** *Dr. Craig Barnes lectures, May 2018 Festival of Homiletics, Washington, DC.; Carey Nieuwhof podcast July 2021; "Manna and Meno" Susan Langhauser article for Lectionary Homiletics magazine, 2018.*