

Food for Life's Journey

“I am the bread of life,” declares Jesus! The Gospel of John is known and loved for its many “I am” statements boldly proclaimed by Jesus. The imagery is vivid and makes a distinct impact upon us like an impressionist painting by Vincent Van Gogh, or a symphony of sound by Beethoven or Bach.

“I am the light of the world,” declares Jesus! I am the Good Shepherd... I am the Vine and you are the branches... I am the resurrection and the life.” All in all, there are seven vivid and powerful “I am” statements by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

The number **seven** always has great significance in the Jewish faith, and in the newly emerging Christian faith that John's Gospel is beginning to define. “Seven” symbolizes completeness, wholeness, and perfection. The number seven points to God and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And how about the boldness of John's artistry in literary form, echoing the ancient Jewish statement contained in the Book of Exodus, 3:14, where “God proclaims loud and clear unto Moses, “I am, that I am,” !!! So, these words, used by John, would break upon its hearer's ears with either shock or reverence, thus eliciting either belief or disbelief, and either affirmation or rejection by those who heard these claims ascribed to Jesus!

Today, we as Christians, embrace these “I am” statements as old friends, but at the time of their writing they were very controversial and a dividing line between the “Old” ways of faith and a newly emerging “New” testament of faith.

When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” he is speaking to a large crowd of people whom he has just “miraculously “ fed, a crowd in the thousands...I've got no idea how he accomplished this, and neither had they – but plainly, Jesus has

their full attention!

Food, also has great symbolic significance in the Bible. The Psalmist invites us to “taste” and “see” that the Lord is good.” Faith in God isn't just what happens in your brain as “thought” waves. We also relate to God through our fabulous other senses processed through our brain, so “taste”, and “smell” and “touch” and “feel” and “see” that our God is good! We are offered the opportunity to relate to God with the whole of ourselves and yet too often we only think of God merely cerebrally. But here we are invited to “taste” and “touch” and “smell” and “see” and “hear” that the Lord our God is good!

I vividly remember one time standing out in the middle of a field of corn, under a full moon, listening in the stillness of silence, and it was as if I could hear the corn growing. It was a magical and mystical experience of the life giving presence of God all around me.

We all know that food is essential to life. Bread in particular is the staple food of the Middle East, like rice is to Asia, or corn is the North and South America. So biblically-speaking, bread stands for that basic sustenance which keeps people alive. Something you cannot live without, physically or spiritually.

So when Jesus says he is the Bread of Life and when he talks about the “bread” that God gives, he is saying something about what our deepest and most basic needs really are, and how they are satisfied.

God's spirit is also a staple food. Jesus declares, ...God is indispensable and without God's spirit we starve. It's just that plain and simple!

Perhaps we don't often feel it as dramatically as that. Our lives are often so full of other activities and entertainments that God can come to seem like just an optional extra. An extra “something” for the person who seemingly has everything – fine if you like that sort of religious thing...but really neither here nor

there for far too many people! God may be more of an after dinner mint than a staple food! Things may be going very well for us so why would we need to rely on God's Spirit?

Elijah, in today's Old Testament reading, finds out what happens when the security of his world comes tumbling down. He should have been riding high at this point! He has just defeated all the Priest of the blasphemous Queen Jezebel's courtly religion, in a great and heated contest on Mount Carmel.

He had challenged the priests of the Canaanite god “Baal” to persuade their god to send fire from heaven to “burn” a sacrifice on a wooden altar. Despite all their fervent prayers and chanting—nothing happened! But one word from Elijah to the God of Israel and his sacrifice miraculously went up in flames to the glory of God!

But no sooner had the contest been won than Queen Jezebel declared that she would capture Elijah, take her revenge and kill him! Elijah took to his heels and fled way out into the wilderness and that is where we find him...

He sits down under a solitary broom tree...it is a very vivid picture of his fear and isolation. Even the tree he sits under is all by itself! And there he asks God that he might die! He has literally lost the will to live. “What's the point?” he laments. After all I have done, all I have strived for in the name of what is “true and right”, and all that I have accomplished, I am no further along than my ancestors were! All that effort and perseverance and struggle, yet nothing has really changed, he laments. Jezebel is still in control! And soon there will be plenty of priests of Baal to lead people astray...

He lies down and falls asleep, into the deep, dark sleep of the depressed mind. In that harsh climate of scorching sun and chilling desert nights, to lie down to sleep in his condition could well mean death. But he doesn't really even care.

He is totally apathetic to his fate.

That sense of having lost the “will to live” is all too common in the world today. In Raleigh, we have an agency for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and rape called “Interact.” My former church helped to financially support their work along with many other churches and faith groups. They have two crisis lines operating 24/7 and annually assist approximately 30,000 people. Not all the people seeking help are suicidal, but they all are facing desperate, debilitating situations that eat away at their will to live.

Or, let's think about the desperate and challenging circumstances of world hunger. “Bread for the World,” a Christian advocacy organization estimates that nearly one billion people around the world don't know where their next meal will come from. Put yourself for a moment in their place. Elijah, too, was in a place like that. But my guess is that a high percentage of people have had times in their lives when they found it hard to find compelling reasons to go on living. It can be a great struggle due to fear of illness or bereavement, loss of employment, chronic pain, or simply the accumulated strain and fatigue of having to keep on going in very difficult and overwhelming circumstances.

In Elijah's story we find him giving up on life, and in so doing he gave up on God. But God did not give up on him!

I don't know if I have said it lately, but I certainly believe it strongly: “It doesn't always matter so much the strength of your belief in God, though it certainly helps, but what matters more is that God believes in you!

And God believed in Elijah and there was no way God was going to stop trying to help him. Just as the voice on the other end of the “Interact” hot-line in Raleigh is an angel, so also, it is an Angel this time sent by God to despairing Elijah as he lay curled-up underneath that solitary broom tree.

Often, talk of angels in the Old Testament is just a shorthand way of referring to the “presence of God” through the Holy Spirit, the inner voice of “wisdom,” the “still-small voice” deep within each of us.

So God comes to Elijah and feeds him. A cake, probably flat bread like pita-bread cooked on a stone in the desert's hot sun, and some precious, pure life-sustaining water. He takes a little nourishment and sleeps again.

Yet again, the angel wakes him out of his delirium, “Get up and eat,” counsels the angel, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

In this one encounter, the angel has given him not only food and water, but also a sense that there is a bright future for him! Elijah has been fed, physically and spiritually and renewed, even reborn in a spiritual sense as a precious “child of God.”

The similarity between this story and the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 lies in the truth of God's intention to physically and spiritually feed all of God's precious people.

We all know what it feels like to be fed spiritually...especially at a time when we hunger and thirst for some tangible new direction in our lives and especially after we perceive a fall from God's grace.

When we mess up, or when we feel burnt out or depleted...then we hunger and thirst...until as Psalm 1 proclaims to us: When we meditate upon the Lord, we are spiritually fed...When we commune with nature, we are spiritually fed...When, as Jesus tells us, we go into a private place and close the door to pray privately into the mystic silence, we are spiritually fed...When we hear the Good News of Jesus Christ in a Gospel story, or parable like the “Good Samaritan”, or hymns like “God of Grace and God of Glory,” and then live them out in our daily living, we are being spiritually fed...

And when we are once again satisfied and full, we are ready to proclaim that
we are:

Made in the Image of God,
Nourished by Divine Love,
Sustained by Divine Energy,
Set Free by Divine Mercy,
And Resurrected by God's Divine Grace!

You are all “that” and “more”, and for that we Praise God!!!

AMEN