

The First Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, August 11, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Living Bread from Heaven

John 6:35–51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said, **"I AM the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh"** (v 51)

4.

Jesus makes a tremendous claim when He says that He's **the bread of God come down from heaven to give life to the world** (v 33). He knows the people of His day have a hard time stomaching that. With their eyes, how do they see Him? They see just a first-century Jewish man, one who is like them. Of course, they'd also been present when that Man fed five thousand with a few loaves and a couple fish. They see Him, yet they don't believe. Eyes open, but hearts closed. Hearts closed to what Jesus says; hearts closed to who Jesus is.

And yet Jesus wishes to open their hearts. He would open their hearts by going through their ears and appealing to their stomachs. He says, **"I AM the bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst"** (v 35). The hungry and thirsty who do come to Him He receives as gifts from His Father. The Father entrusts them to Jesus. And Jesus promises not to cast them out, not to lose any of them. In fact, He promises to **raise them up on the Last Day**, because all **who look on the Son and believe in Him have eternal life** (vv 40, 39).

What's the response? **The Jews grumbled about Jesus. They grumbled because He said, "I AM the bread that came down from heaven"** (v 41). Grumbling about Him is, I suppose, better than laughing at Him. It shows they take Him seriously, even if they seriously doubt His claim and find it outlandish. At least they accept that things could come down from heaven. Like the manna in the wilderness—that came down from heaven. Or the meal delivered to Elijah—that also came down from heaven. But that Jesus came down from heaven? That doesn't sit right with them! **"Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I've come down from heaven'"** (v 42). How can *He* be the bread?

They knew—or they thought they knew!—who He was and where He came from. Jesus was too plain, too ordinary, too everyday, too much like them. And yet Jesus points out a major problem for them: Death. **“Even your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died”** (v 49).

3.

People in our day—and don’t pretend like you’re immune—people in our day have a hard time believing that *anything* came down from heaven. They’re skeptical, in fact, that there’s even a heaven to come down from—or at least any heaven different than where the Starliner astronauts are stuck. The earth we know. What we can see, we believe. That’s what seems real. But heaven? Why, that seems so far away, mythical even, like a figment of the imagination.

According to some, the problem is that the world has become too big. We know too much. Microscopes, telescopes, Google searches and everything in between have left little room for heaven. Honestly, though, I think we have the opposite problem. It’s not that we know too much. It’s that we know too little. It’s not that our view of the world is too big. It’s that our view of the world has become too small. It’s contracted, shrunken, reduced to what our eyes take in—which is to say, for many our view of the world is no bigger than our TV or our cell phone. And that doesn’t leave much room for heaven or Jesus or belief or eternal life.

We’re stuck in our little enclosed worlds, and we don’t have the eyes to see what is real. There’s a scene in *The Last Battle* by C. S. Lewis—the final book of his Chronicles of Narnia—that captures this. A group of dwarves has passed through the door from their world into the next world, but they can’t see it. They’re blind to the great feast laid out for them. They’re blind to the grass under their feet. They’re blind even to the sun above them and the feel of it on their skin. They believe they’re stuck in a dark, dank horse stable with animal fodder, and nothing can convince them otherwise, not even when the heavenly Lion roars right in their faces.

What’s it take to wake us up? Death is a hard reality. What the world feeds us doesn’t give life; it only gives more death. Will we continue to eat the bread the fathers ate . . . and die?

2.

Jesus offers something else. He provides a reality beyond this one. He serves up a life greater than death. He calls it eternal life: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I AM the bread of life. . . . This is the bread that comes down from**

heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I AM the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I'll give for the life of the world is My flesh" (vv 47–48, 50–51). Jesus opens up a view of a world that's bigger, of a life that's eternal—in Himself, that is, in His flesh.

But what does Jesus mean when He says that He'll give His flesh for the life of the world? He means, first of all, the cross. There can be no eternal life for the world apart from His death on behalf of the world. In His flesh, He takes away the sin of the world. He pays for it, puts it to death, removes it, buries it in His grave, and leaves it there when He rises. Those who stuck with Jesus wouldn't be disappointed—not in the end. Death held no power over Him. Because **if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever** (v 50).

That's what gave the holy martyrs their strength. They knew that this life wasn't everything. They considered what they had here to be small, light, momentary, and passing. That included their afflictions. They didn't flee from death. They didn't cower before it. And they didn't resign themselves to it. Because of what they had in Jesus, they could endure it, brave it, and face it with the confidence of those who have eternal life. And on the Last Day, He will raise them up.

Elijah received this same strength when he fled from Jezebel, as we heard in the Old Testament reading. She was out to have him killed, so Elijah ran until he collapsed. In doubt and fear, he thought, "What am I doing?!? Nothing is working." **And he asked that he might die, saying, "It's enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I'm no better than my fathers"** (1 Kgs 19:4). Then he lay down. And God, in His mercy, sent His angel to wake him, to give him food for the journey, and to strengthen him. God has patience with weak Elijah. Even before the incarnation, the Son of God appears to him in that angelic form. He tastes the bread of life, and **went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God** (1 Kgs 8).

1.

Like Elijah, you may be weary of doing good. You may be tired of suffering. You may even feel alone and abandoned. Even so, God the Father has given you to His Son. He has drawn you to Jesus. What else can explain the fact that you are here? He has put you in our Lord's hands. You look on the Son—crucified for you and risen from the dead. You believe in Him. What it adds up to is this: You have eternal life. You *have* it. Not just in the future. Even now, unseen, hidden, but real. Remember, Jesus brings a reality that's bigger, not smaller.

You have Jesus in another way, too. As He gave His flesh for the life of the world on the cross, so He gives His body and blood to you in Holy Communion. Jesus is the source of life that lasts forever. He's the fountain of life. And so, as He did for Elijah, so He does for us: He touches you, tells you to arise, invites you to eat, and strengthens you for your life in this world. Does He promise you an easy life here? Does He say that it will be a breeze? No! But He gives you Himself, and you can go in the strength of that food for forty days and more, all the way to the Mountain of God.

In the strength of this food, St. Paul urges us to put off the old life of sin and **put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness** (Eph 4:24). Speak the truth. Build one another up with your words. Work hard with your hands. **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. . . . And walk in love, as Christ loves us and gave Himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God** (Eph 4:32, 5:2).

And we know what lies ahead. His great promise: Even as He's risen from the dead, so **I will raise him up on the Last Day** (v 44). And in that day, there will be no hunger, no thirst. **Blessed indeed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for those who eat the living bread, those who eat the bread that Jesus gives, they shall be satisfied** (Matt 5:6).

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
