

## *Good Bread*

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Psalm 34:1-8; John 6:35, 41-51  
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Part of the wonder of studying the Bible is seeing how *there are connections* all over the place in the Bible. You start with one text, which then leads you to another text, and then another text, and then another text. Just as each of us is on a journey through life, trying to discover and learn how to live well, the Bible itself is on a bit of a journey, putting life together text by text by text. So if you're interested, I want to invite you to come on a journey with me, as we see where our texts take us.

Our two lectionary texts for today are Psalm 34 and John 6. One connection between these two texts is that they both have to do with the pleasures of eating, pleasures and joys which are both very physical and material, and much more than material. Psalm 34:8 sings, "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" This is a phrase that we sometimes use when we are preparing to participate in the communion meal, the church's sacramental meal of partaking the bread and the cup. Then in John 6, Jesus riffs on this a little bit, when he announces, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." If you will, turn with me to John 6, verse 51: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

"I am the living bread." That's John 6. Now, flip back a couple of pages to John 4. John 4 is the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman – who would have been an outsider to Jesus' own community – he tells her in verse 10 that he will give her "living water," and that whoever drinks of this living water will never be thirsty.

Living bread, living water. Living bread, the bread of life, which addresses the deepest hungers of your life. Living water, which quenches the deepest thirsts of your life. In these two passages, Jesus is talking about very material reality, basic material reality. Water and bread are basic, common, ordinary, material things. *And*, in these two passages, Jesus is pointing through these basic, common, ordinary, material things to something much deeper. These two texts are showing us the path of life, the path to being alive.

Now what you need to know here is that the Greek language of the New Testament has more than one word for being alive. There is the word *bios*, and there is the word *zoe*. *Bios* refers to being physically alive. *Zoe* refers to being spiritually alive. There is a difference, there is a distinction, between being physically alive and being spiritually alive. It is entirely possible to be alive biologically, for your heart to be

beating, for your lungs to be working, for you to be able to go throughout your days, but to be spiritually asleep, to be spiritually empty and dead. This is what happens when we live in fear of other people, when we live in anxiety from moment to moment, when we live with resentment and hatred, when we spend our lives chasing after things that promise to make us happy, but when we get them, we find that the promises were empty inside. We can have *bios* but be *starving and thirsting* for *zoe*. Zoe is about being connected to life, living with joy and freedom and peacefulness and compassion and courage and creativity and solidarity with others.

The word *Zoe* appears 36 times in the Gospel of John, more than in any other book. When Jesus famously says in John 10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly," the word he uses is *zoe*. Jesus did not merely come to give us *bios*. He came to give us *zoe*. The living bread that Jesus gives us is *zoe* bread. And the living water that Jesus gives us is *zoe* water. When John Molina Moore, our General Presbyter, was here a couple of weeks ago, he spoke of the thousands of people in our community who are hungry for meaning and connection and transcendence – they are craving *zoe* – and how the church has an opportunity to reach out to them, not because we ourselves are the living bread, but because Jesus is.

Now, to continue with the connections and the contrasts that we are working with here, I want you to turn to Psalm 127 and then we're going to go to Isaiah 55. We've been talking about living bread. The Bible also knows that there is a kind of bread that will kill you. Psalm 127, in the middle of the Bible, is a psalm of reliance on the Lord. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Psalm 127 is showing us that if we are engaged in a project that is in opposition to God's will and intentions for us, that project is going to fail. It doesn't matter how hard we work at it, if it is not congruent with God's grace and God's love for the world, sooner or later, it will fall apart. This is why the psalm can say in verse 3, "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, *eating the bread of anxious toil*, for the Lord gives sleep to his beloved." John 6 invites us to eat the 'living bread.' Psalm 127 knows that it is entirely possible to devote our time to eating 'the bread of anxious toil.' The life of faith is about developing a taste for the living bread of Jesus, and resisting the seductive temptation of 'the bread of anxious toil.' You know, and I know, that the bread of anxious toil can taste really good. It can taste like success, taste like power, taste like control, taste like greed. The bread of anxious toil tastes really good, but it will kill you.

Now we've got one more bread text. Flip forward a few books to Isaiah 55. Isaiah 55 is addressed to the Jews who were floundering in exile in Babylon, living under the pressures of the Babylonian empire and being bullied into thinking that the Babylonian gods of greed and violence were the only available options for staying secure. "Ho, everyone who thirsts," the prophet calls out. "Come to the waters; you that have no money, don't worry about it. Come and eat! You do not need the money of the empire. Come and buy wine and milk without money and without price." The living water, the wine of grace, and the milk of new life are not for sale, because God

gives them out for free to those who yearn for them. And then the prophet says in verse 2, "Why do you spend your money for that which is *not bread*, and your labor for that which is not satisfy?" In John 6, Jesus offers us living bread that meets our deepest hungers. Isaiah 55 knows that we can spend our time and our energy chasing after what we think is good bread, but is actually "not bread." Why would you eat "not bread" when you can have "living bread"? The 'bread of anxious toil' in Psalm 127 and the 'not bread' of Isaiah 55 represent all of the things that we think will make us happy, but never do, all of the things that we chase after, all of our various programs for happiness, all of our addictions, all of our false gods, our craving for other people's approval, our craving for things to come out the way we want them to, our fears about securing our own lives with enough money, or enough guns and bombs, or enough entertainment to keep us distracted. We spend enormous amounts of money on them, and they never, never leave us satisfied.

The bread of life is the good bread. And as Pastor Jen reminded us last week, "There is always more of this bread of life, so you need not hunger for it."

I hope that you can hear, in these words about living bread and living water, how there is profound news for us in our own lives, and there is a profound calling for us in the world. These words have so much to do with our own spiritual growth, and they have so much to do with our mission work and our evangelism work. There is a profound personal, spiritual message for you and me here, because we live in an age of anxiety, an age of polarization, an age of violence, an age of fear, and all of us are susceptible to these things. We live in exceedingly challenging times, and we will be tempted around every corner to pursue the bread of anxious toil of Psalm 127 and the 'not bread' of Isaiah 55 to try and make ourselves feel safe, accepted, and in control. But Jesus invites you and me to come to him, to lay our burdens at his feet, and to receive his love, his guidance, his friendship, and his life. The simple, living bread of dwelling in our relationship with Jesus, letting his love fill us, letting his love guide us, letting his love give us all the security we need to be *established* in our turbulent world.

And of course, just as you and I live in challenging times, our neighbors here in Fairfax County do as well. Many of them are chasing the bread of anxious toil, hounded by stress and pressure and fears about the future. They may sense that there must be a better way. Jesus has already set them free from the pursuit of anxious toil, and he wants them to know the new life that he has in store for them, a path through life of compassion and connection with all that is, a path of humble strength and nonviolent love for the enemy, a path that is not tribal but that rejoices in the fact that we really are all in this together. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.