

Three Promises

“I am the bread that came down from heaven.” What a remarkable statement from Jesus, almost guaranteed to drive his opponents into a self-righteous froth. But as we celebrate this season of his incarnation, of the Word become flesh, we who have put our faith in the message and person of Jesus can draw great comfort from these words in the Gospel According to John. There are three promises stated and restated in these twelve verses that have held great meaning for the followers of Jesus over the centuries and I want to briefly explore those this morning, especially in how they continue to have meaning for our lives nearly two thousand years after they were spoken, before we share once again in our monthly practice of revisiting the symbolic rite which embodies Jesus’ teaching in bread and grape, gathering the three promises up into a foreshadowing of the heavenly wedding banquet in which those promises will be fulfilled.

First, though, a quick note about preaching method. As you all know, I am convinced that there is something for us to learn from the entirety of the Bible and wary of falling into a sort of “Big Top Forty Hits” approach to preaching. Today marks the beginning of my exploration of yet another recently proposed lectionary, this one from the book Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro. I’ll say more about this new-to-us project in upcoming weeks but, with an eye to the clock and the time needed for Communion, I simply mention it this morning as my source for choosing this passage and the related Psalm and move now to the meat of what I’ve drawn from my reading of John 6.

It is the three promises that Jesus makes to his followers that captured my attention this week. They are, in a way that is common to the Book of John, stated and restated in our twelve verses. It’s one of the features of this Gospel that inclines me to believe that the Fourth Gospel is indeed based on the memories of someone who heard Jesus speak, likely John, the son of Zebedee. The repetitive nature of Jesus’ discourses as recorded in this book makes for occasionally tedious reading and provides little advancement in understanding through the repetition. But the slight changes in wording while presenting concepts is a terrific tool for the orator who is dealing with a large, buzzing crowd. Not everyone will hear every word, so Jesus makes sure to present each idea multiple times. Nor will every phrasing connect with every hearer. But the repetitions work for the moment of delivery as well as making for easier memorization of his teaching for those who were hanging on his every word.

So, what were the promises that Jesus made that day, important enough to him that he wanted to be sure that his disciples would remember them? The first is found in verse 35: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” This seems to me to be a particular apt reminder at the holiday season. How many of us, I wonder, have found ourselves thinking multiple times in the last six weeks, after huge feasts at Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Day, or New Year’s Eve and Day, that we may never need to or even want to eat again? But the turkey and dressing, roast beef and trimmings, pâtés, canapés, and black-eyed peas and cornbread don’t ultimately stick with us, do they? Many of us are now contemplating diets of various kinds because most of us live with the sort of abundance that a first century Palestinian could only dream of.

Our approach to the winter holidays, running from late November through the early days of January, with our feasts and gift-giving, could be understood to celebrate our own accomplishments rather than preparation for and wondering remembrance of the Incarnation of

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God With Us. We, and I very much include myself in this, seem to be working hard to deny the need in our lives for divine intervention. Even in this year of pandemic (please God, it will be over soon), we devise ways of distracting ourselves from the real hunger of our souls for God and God's righteousness. It is still too easy to slip into our culture's drive for financial gain which ignores those who are used up and spat out by the machinery of consumer culture and which continues, despite the wisdom of scientists and the pleas of activists, to rape our planet.

But Jesus calls on us to see him as the lasting solution to the empty places inside of us. The presence of Jesus in our lives is the way to filling what poets have called "the God-shaped hole." The great African theologian, Augustine of Hippo, perhaps said it best: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Jesus promises that in his presence in our lives, our hungers and thirst will find their true fulfillment.

But what is to become of us when we, almost inevitably it seems, forget that promise of Jesus and wander abroad searching for other things to fulfill us? The second promise of Jesus answers that question: "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away." At the risk of entering once again into the debate about faith and works (and today, by the way, is the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's excommunication from the Church of Rome, the same Martin Luther who wrote the words to the hymn we've just sung), Jesus seems to be saying pretty clearly that once we start on his path, we can no more work our way out of God's love than we can work our way in. Two verses later, he says, "And this is the will of (God) who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that (God) has given me..."

This is remarkably good news for those of us who are not perfect in our pursuit of the will of God for our lives, meaning everybody. So, if anyone listening to this is feeling guilty about overindulgences during the last six weeks, six months, six years, or six decades, knock it off. We are all forgiven. Now, do better today. And when we get to tomorrow, you can do better tomorrow, too. But don't worry about tomorrow until you get there. Jesus said that, too, or something a lot like it. This concept of Jesus not losing anybody has been popular among Baptists, by the way, since the earliest days of our movement. The "Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689" includes "Chapter 17: Of the Perseverance of the Saints." More recently, in a publication upon which I was raised, the "Baptist Faith and Message" of 1963 puts it this way: "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation." Old school Baptists of my youth called this concept, "Once saved, always saved."

Finally, Jesus gives us this promise: "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." In response to objections from his opponents, Jesus doubles down on this promise a few verses later: "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. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Amid the promises of fulfillment and security, this promise of life continues to be the promise that is

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perhaps most comforting to a grieving world. At any time of death, but particularly at this time of pandemic when the end of lives that are meaningful to us seem overwhelming, we who believe in the promises of Jesus can rest in his promise that those who have lived lives of faith, even those who have done so imperfectly, are welcomed into a life that death cannot touch. Jesus does not share the details of what this life looks like, other than to say that those who are his will be raised to a new kind of physical life on “the last day.” So, we are left with questions: do the dead in Christ sleep? Are they, like the thief, with him in Paradise upon death? What happens on “the last day” and how are the multitude of believers to be accommodated? What needs will be felt by the new bodies? None of this is known to us. But we remember that it was Jesus who promised, the one who loved all of those who believed and believe in him so completely that he was willing to lay down his life for us all. And we remember that Paul wrote, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And so, we are comforted even when our nearest and dearest are separated from us for a time by death.

And I maintain, along with many others, that this promise of Jesus for us has meaning beyond our comfort in the face of death. When Jesus promises eternal life, or the life of the age to come as it is sometimes translated, there is a component of the promise for the present as well as for the future. Because of the influence of Jesus on our lives, because his incarnation brought the Kingdom of God close to us, among us, within us, we have begun to experience “the life of the age to come,” in the present age of brokenness. In a time of spiritual poverty, hunger, and thirst, we can know “abundant life” in which our spirits are filled. The first and the third promise are knit together. As we live out the lessons of Jesus, we work together to bring God’s Beloved Community to reality. God’s will is done on earth, as it is in heaven. In the divisions of humankind, in the refusal to see our common siblingship, in our failure to take delight in our diversity and our insistence instead that those who are different from us are not a part or not a full part of God’s family, humankind manages to keep the Beloved Community from being fully realized. But, nonetheless, we get glimpses, here and there. We see the Kingdom being fulfilled in acts of kindness around us. We experience a tiny slice of heaven in the in-person or on-line gatherings of the people we love. I cannot begin to express in an adequate way how much it means to me to see all of you on a Sunday morning, even when we are limited to presence via screens and speakers on Zoom. Our little church is the Beloved Community writ small and I thank God for all of you and for the privilege of our relationship.

And, of course, as I said to begin with, we experience a foretaste of the great Wedding Banquet in our sharing of the bread and the grape on the first Sunday of every month. It is an action so deeply symbolic that it goes past rite or ritual and can open our minds and our hearts to the presence of God With Us as no other activity can. In the consumption of tiny fragments of bread and juice, we connect with the reality of Jesus’ words, “I am the Bread of Life... the living bread that came down from heaven.” And in that connection, in those fragments, we are fed with the truth that we need never hunger or thirst in our spirits again.

There is a song that we have sung many times before during Advent and Christmas although not in the last few years, called “He Came Down.” Do you remember it? It’s from Cameroon and has been translated and popularized among English speakers by John L. Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland. In response to the cantor’s query, “Why did he come?” the congregation sings, “He came down that we may have love... peace... joy... life. Hallelujah

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forever more.” On this second Sunday of Christmastide, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, it is good for us to remember why the Bread of Life came down from heaven. He came to spare us from death, certainly, but much more than that. He came that we might have the life of the age to come, full of love, peace, and joy. He came so that fear might be put to flight. He came to bring hope to every nation. He came and comes to feed us hungry ones in our need. In our houses, there is bread. As we prepare to eat, let us sing. Thanks be to God. Amen.