



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SERMON PREACHED AT ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL, LONDON
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 11, 2024
1 KINGS 19:4-8; PSALM 34:1-8; EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2; JOHN 6:35, 41-51

FINDING MIRACLES IN THE MIDST

John 6:35, 41-51 [*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." Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 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."*]

I bring greetings from the good folk of Saint Mark's Cathedral in Seattle.

Grace to you and peace this morning!

I am grateful for the invitation from Dean Tremlett to preach this morning, and to the cathedral canons, vergers, and staff for your most generous welcome.

In addressing Jesus' curious commentary on living bread we just heard from the gospel, I would like to angle in with a bit about breakfast beans, if I may, in hopes that we might locate the gift of grace offered us in the ordinary. Not necessarily beans, mind you, but in the course of our daily lives, if we are alert to the possibility.

I should tell you I have spent the last month traveling to various parts of Britain on pilgrimage walking a portion of the coastal path in northern Wales before meeting a group from my parish in Dublin to make pilgrimage to ancient Celtic sites across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, and then joining our Compline Choir in London this past week, as they serve as choir in residence here at St. Paul's Cathedral.

During my travels across these last 34 days, I have lodged in 13 inns, hotels, and guest houses, and through all of it, I have enjoyed immeasurably wonderful hospitality offered by countless souls.

Nowhere is this more palpable than in the British breakfast, variably expressed as Welsh breakfast, Irish, Scottish and English breakfasts, in which baked beans are a staple.

Now I am not unfamiliar with baked beans as a provision at American BBQs, but starting the day with beans is a British culinary practice which I have not yet mastered.

A little research reveals that this tradition of beans at breakfast was forged in the Industrial Revolution, when workers, including some of my British ancestors, needed a hardy breakfast with substantial protein to fortify them for the long laborious day ahead.

Low cost, abundantly available, and savory flavors make for a solid meal plan that now shapes the culinary traditions of several countries.

I was raised in the southern United States where our cultural equivalent for breakfast beans is grits.

Grits are similar to polenta, but sadly lack the same marketing plan as their Italian relative; grits are simply coarsely ground corn which can be reconstituted with boiled salt water.

The flavor comes primarily from what you add to them—cheese, butter, bits of bacon, jalapeno peppers, and so forth.

Corn was low cost, abundant, and could be dried and stored for extended periods, making it a good go-to for a breakfast that will stick to your bones.

In the agrarian southern U.S. to which my ancestors immigrated, a hearty breakfast was sustenance for the hard day's work on the farm.

In my childhood when one ordered breakfast, grits just came whether asked for or not. Like baked beans here I suppose.

There was an adage: *grits are like grace; they just come*. Grace is a gift from God that just comes, even unexpectedly. So the invitation was to be open to grace appearing in the ordinary parts of our lives. Grace just comes.

Here's the thing though: Cooked grits don't store well. They stiffen into a thick mealy block when they cool, and so you don't make extra grits to keep on hand.

A day's sustenance, and no more...like the ancient Israelites in the desert, whose manna was the day's nutrition, but it wouldn't keep.

Jesus mentions manna in the gospel reading this morning, making reference to the daily meal gathered by our ancestors of faith in the desert.

Israelites gathering manna in the wilderness day by day.

The word manna is actually a play on the Hebrew *man hu*—a question literally translated, “what is that?!”

The Book of Exodus says that manna tasted like “coriander seed, white, like wafers made with honey.”

Manna is still gathered for breakfast by Bedouins who live in the Sinai Peninsula, but the stomach-turning truth is that manna is a sticky excretion from the bugs that feed on the sap of the tamarisk trees in that region.

The sap is low in protein so the bugs have adapted, eating lots of it, excreting the sweet carbohydrate-rich excess in clumps of sweet white sticky residue which attracts ants who clean up the leftovers. People found it edible, too.

Manna makes beans and grits sound all the better, right?!

Manna is not quite the miraculous image of delectable bread falling from heaven with that fresh-baked yeasty aroma in the air, as if it just fell from a Gail's Bakery in the sky, but there it is, God providing for the people in the wilderness...with a quintessentially earthy origin.

They ate it daily for forty years, which by my count means fourteen thousand six hundred days straight. Sustenance for the journey. One day at a time. Every day...¹

The 5000 people who were fed miraculously by Jesus earlier in the day are nonplussed now when he says “I am the bread of life. I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

They knew him to be a commoner, a day laborer, a carpenter who would have needed a hearty breakfast at the outset of his workday.

Who is he to be saying such things! It is their own version of the ancestors' question, Man hu? What is this?

The feeding of the five thousand took five crusty barley loaves and two cold fish—not exactly a five-star meal—not even simple fair of hot fresh fish and chips, but all were fed with leftovers gathered up in an act of

abundant trust, which, it seems to me, is the catalyst for such miracles to be experienced.

Trust.

Trust that God is stirring, and providing, even if it seems oddly less than special. Grace is a gift that just comes.

Jesus the commoner showed us that. He embodied it, and he invites us to embody it as well.

Trust that God is stirring in the midst of our ordinary lives.

The core of our sacramental theology as Christians is that God provides the gift of grace in the ordinary elements of bread and wine.

The simple feast we share here this morning— a morsel of bread and a sip of wine—fortify us for the journey, this earthly pilgrimage.

We can trust that this simple meal is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which all our spiritual ancestors enjoy, a sacramental miracle and mystery that nourishes us today even unto eternal life.

Miracles need not be extraordinary to be sublime gifts of grace. They need not even be experienced in church.

In fact, most won't, if we are really honest, But to really see the gift requires being open to the possibilities that abound in ordinary life.

The 20th Century Jesuit theologian and scientist Teilhard de Jardin wrote eloquently of this ordinary grace: the mystery of living bread to be found in the aesthetic of creation's quotidian flavors.

The whole earth is our altar, as it were.

Nothing in all creation is rendered profane for those who know how to see. For those who might ask the curious question, Man hu? What is it?

And see it for what it is: a gift from God in the ordinary moments of our day. Yeah, even a miracle of abundant grace.

Grace comes, friends. May it be yours this day and always.

¹ This line of exegetical thought comes from Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Bread of Life*.