

Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have bread and wine this morning, which earth has given and human hands have made. They will become for us the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Amen.

At one of the parishes I served, we formed a committee to make the church more welcoming. We looked at different aspects of the building, was the entryway visually inviting, was the music meaningful? We even thought about how the church smelled! Since the Eucharist is the heart of our worship, and nothing smells better than baking bread, we decided to buy a bread machine. The plan was to start the bread early on Sunday mornings so that by the time people arrived at church, the warm smell of yeast and flour would fill the church. As with so many things, it was a great idea in theory but hard to execute. The first issue was the bread. What kind of flour would we use? There were many surprisingly passionate opinions about white v whole wheat. Then there was the issue of who would prepare it and set the timer. We discovered that letting the ingredients sit overnight did not produce nice fluffy loaves but rather dense hockey pucks. So someone would have to come to church at 5:30am or so to add the ingredients and turn it on. That was even more problematic than the flour. Well, it only took a couple of months for us to, sadly, retire the bread machine. But on those days that we did manage to create loaves of bread, the smell truly was delicious and welcoming, an invitation to a heavenly banquet.

Bread is not only the foundation of so many meals but it is also the primal image of how we are fed and sustained by God. The readings this morning tell us stories of how God has fed and continues to feed us. Look at what a key role bread plays in the foundational stories of Christianity and Judaism. The story of God liberating the Hebrew people, leading them out against Pharaoh's huge army and providing meat and bread for them during their long journey in the desert. The Jews remember that every year when they celebrate Passover. Just as the Hebrew people yearned to be fed in the middle of the desert, so the crowds following Jesus yearned to be fed as well, physically and spiritually. It's all about the food. That is where we come together.

And that's one of the reasons this past year has been so painful.
No shared bread, no shared meals at this table has been a real hardship.
And what a relief, what a great pleasure, to be able to rejoin this community
and in a sense, all communities, around this table.
We began this morning with the Hebrew people tromping around the Sinai desert
for what ended up being 40 years.
Like so many things in life, they had no idea what they were getting into.
They knew that they were sick and tired of being slaves of the Egyptians.
They wanted to be free.
And when Moses came along to lead them away from bondage into freedom,
they followed him eagerly.
I doubt if they had known how hard life in the desert would be
or that they would be traveling for 40 years, they would ever have started out.
But fortunately for them, and for us,
it's a blessing when we don't know the details of all that lies ahead
or we would never do things like have children or remodel our kitchens.
I love this whiny moment in the story when they insist
it would have been better for them if they had died in Egypt
than follow Moses into the wilderness.
At least they would have died with full stomachs!
Fortunately, God comes to the rescue and promises
that they will have meat in the evenings and bread in the mornings.
They were probably imagining nice loaves of fresh bread.
Instead, the next morning, they woke up to find the ground covered
with a white flaky substance which looked like dandruff or powdered detergent,
but not bread, for heaven's sake.
But this manna was bread, not the bread they expected,
but just the right sustenance for them.
It appeared every morning, not too much, not too little,
to sustain them until they reached the Promised Land.
The theme of hunger runs through the Bible.
The Hebrew people were hungry.
The Hebrew people looked to Moses for food.
The crowds looked to Jesus to feed them.
God, through Moses and Jesus,
provided the people with manna and bread, meat and fish.
The Hebrew people were sustained in their wandering and brought
"to a good land, a land with flowing streams...a land of wheat and barley...
a land where they could eat bread without scarcity." (Deut 8)
And as we heard in the story of the feeding of the 5000 last week,

the people of Israel were fed as they followed Jesus around to hear his teaching.
But God didn't just create bodies which need to be fed.
God also created souls that need a different kind of feeding.
The time for bread and fish had passed.
The time to address the real issue had arrived.
The crowd was looking for bread but Jesus gave them something
beyond the food they were expecting.
"You are looking for me...because you ate your fill of the loaves," he said.
"Do not work for the food that perishes,
but for the food that endures for eternal life."
Now, the people were ready to hear about the true bread, the bread of life.

In the Book of 1 Kings (19:1-9) there is a scene where Elijah the prophet
is fleeing from Queen Jezebel.
She is determined to kill him and he runs for his life and finally arrives,
exhausted, under a broom tree.
As he sleeps, an angel comes and lays before him food and drink.
She waits patiently for him to wake up and then says to him,
"Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."
The journey can be too much for us.
There are times when despair and hopelessness overwhelm every bit of ability
we have to act and move forward,
when we truly do not know where our strength will come from –
where to go, what to do, or how, how we can go on.
It is the living bread of Christ that is our sustenance for the journey.
There is a Latin word, viaticum,
and its old meaning is provisions for a journey,
the food and clothes and money that a Roman magistrate needed to take with him
as he traveled around the empire.
In the early church, the Communion wafer
that was given to a person who was dying was called the Viaticum,
the bread they needed for the journey from life to death.
The Eucharistic bread is also the provision we need for our journey here on earth.

During the bombing raids of WWII, many children were orphaned
and left to starve.
Some of them were brought to refugee camps
where they could live with some protection.
Although they had a bed and enough food, they could not sleep at night.
They had nightmares or worried that they would wake up

and find themselves back on the streets.

Nothing seemed to help until someone had the brilliant idea
of giving them a piece of bread to take to bed with them.

Holding their bread, they could finally fall sleep in peace.

Jesus is the bread that we hold onto as we toss and turn on sleepless nights,
the bread that we hold in our hands here today
and the bread that we take inside of us when we leave,
the bread that we seek as we look for meaning and truth,
bread for our hungry hearts. Sir, give us this bread always. Amen.