

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When it comes to matters of faith, we tend to fall back on what we know. If we grew up in the church, we remember the prayers that our parents or grandparents taught us, and the rituals that went along with them. And in worship every week, or studying the Bible on our own, we learn about how the stories of faith in God and who Jesus is come to be part of people's lives.

In that respect, we're not that far-removed from the people in John's gospel as they recall the stories of their ancestors in trying to figure out who Jesus is and understand what he's telling them.

For example, the woman at the well in John ch4 told Jesus that that water source dated all the way back to Jacob. And the people in tonight's reading recalled the Israelites' experience with manna in the wilderness.

Each of these conversations, and the ones that happen later in the rest of the gospel, reveal a little more about who Jesus is and, in turn, more about the character of God. And what the people had already seen and heard about Jesus and *from* Jesus, was all new. And it was things they'd never even imagined before.

So they went back to what was familiar to try and make sense of it all.

But Jesus needed them to see that in him, the Word made flesh, God *was* up to something new. And these conversations that he had with them were a means to draw them into the newness of what God was doing through Jesus *right then* and the possibilities that came with it.

The crowd that followed Jesus in tonight's gospel reading had just eaten their fill of fish and bread that Jesus had blessed. And they wanted more, so they went looking for him.

And when we remember that the people in this crowd probably weren't wealthy, trying to find the person who could seemingly produce bread out of thin air makes a lot of sense.

So, looking for Jesus wasn't necessarily the wrong thing to do – it was an act of faith. But their action was shortsighted. Jesus knew that their reason for searching was insufficient, and that they needed help to understand that Jesus' life-giving mission reached farther than they could imagine.

Because no matter how good it is to cure people of disease and feed a hungry crowd, Jesus was sent to give the world something even greater – himself.

In this part of the gospel, he communicated that using the image of bread – sustenance and nourishment that people could relate to. Because even the poorest of the poor had access to bread of some type. It kept people physically alive.

And Jesus recognized the importance of acknowledging that. But he needed them to take it a step further and understand the spiritual significance of who he was. And it was a stretch.

They didn't just say, "Okay." They wanted more proof of what Jesus was saying – specifically, they wanted more actual bread, and they kept comparing him to Moses.

¹But by naming himself as the bread of *life*, Jesus asked them to rethink the history on which their understanding of God was based – what their ancestors had taught them through the generations – and to rethink the nature of their relationship with God.

To be in relationship with God, with Jesus, in a way that nourished and sustained them eternally – not just for a meal, or even for a day. But to recognize that it's a life-giving relationship for them as individuals *and* for the whole world.

It was an idea, an understanding, a way of living that they needed to internalize – to make part of them in their core. To know by heart.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/bread-of-life/commentary-on-john-635-59>

It's an understanding that many of us grew up with, and that shapes our relationship to and with Jesus – but that we still don't always get right. Because all these years later, we have our *own* traditions that limit us and get in the way of what God is trying to show us through Jesus. That keep us from being nourished by Jesus as the bread of life.

A story is told about a reporter who interviewed Mahatma Gandhi about his thoughts on Christians. When the reporter asked, "What do you think of them?" Gandhi responded, "Go get a stone from the river and bring it to me."

The reporter did as he was asked, and Gandhi said, "That river always has water and is never dry; so this rock is wet. Now help me split it open."

They did, and found that the center of the rock was dry. The water had gotten into some of the cracks in the rock, but not all the way into the center.

Gandhi said, "Christians have known the teachings of Jesus for centuries, and the good news of Jesus and his teachings have remained on the surface and haven't gotten into the center of their lives."

When I first read that and considered whether to include it tonight, I thought, "Ouch."

But the good news about the bread of life that is Jesus, is that it's always available. Always there, ready to nourish us at the center of our lives.

In the season of Lent, we are asked to intentionally focus on our relationship with God. To spend time in it, and be nourished by it. Part of that means asking ourselves, "What's getting in the way of that relationship? What's keeping it from getting into the center of our lives?"

Or, in a manner of speaking, "What are we nourishing ourselves with, if not Jesus – the bread of life?"

We can each come up with our own answers to that question. And we know that whatever answers we give are just temporary sustenance. But what we also recognize is that living a life of faith is a process. That our understanding of God and our relationship with Jesus is a continual learning and relearning of who they are.

And each time we turn and *return* toward God, and we take in the bread of life that is Jesus, the relationship seeps into us a little more. And we understand that it's nourishment that sustains us throughout our lives. Because it breaks open our hearts and becomes part of who we are.

And as it does, it brings our relationship with Jesus to life – and brings *us* to life not just today or in this season, but forever.

Thanks be to God! Amen.