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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Kings 19:4-8, John 6:35, 41-51
The Old Testament and Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text is the troubled question of the people when Jesus claims that he is the bread which came down from heaven. They murmur about that claim:

⁴²They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” (John 6:42, RSV)

Many of us love the picture of Jesus we get from the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Our hearts chime with the teaching of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount¹ about loving even our enemies. We are inspired by the parables in St. Luke about the Good Samaritan² and the Prodigal Son³. We wish that at the end of our lives, someone could look back and say of us what was said of Jesus:

... how he went about *doing good* and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (Acts 10:38, RSV)

But our text this morning and for the next three Sundays does not come from what are called the “Synoptic Gospels” — that is from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Rather, we must deal with this good man (pointing to our statue of St. John): St. John the Evangelist, that elevated and far-seeing preacher.

In our lectionary, six summertime Sundays in a row are dedicated to John 6. Pastors Kathleen Koran and Glenn Miller took charge of the first two of those Sundays, and God willing, I will take charge of these next four.

Let me pause to give you a glance into my profession. I still smile when I remember a clergy meeting a few months ago when one of my colleagues sighed and said, “Here they are again, those six Sundays on John 6. I wonder whether I am going to have enough to say for those six Sundays?” We all knew how he was feeling. You see, there is no sure science to writing a sermon. I mentioned this in a class in the undercroft recently. There is no sure mathematics or mechanics or method to writing a sermon. For the poor preacher, it more like waiting for a

¹ Matthew 5-7

² Luke 10

³ Luke 15

miracle week by week. I mean the miracle of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and use of our sermon to help create and sustain faith on earth and help people along. Six Sundays in a row on the same chapter is a bit intimidating for us preachers.

But I think that the writers of the lectionary were onto something when they set these six summertime lessons before us. In John 6, our minds and our hearts are elevated. In John 6, we learn that we are not dealing just with the man his neighbors thought they knew:

⁴²They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?"

Rather, they are dealing with the very Word of God — the One who spoke through the prophets of old, the One through whom all things were made, as St. John says in Chapter One:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God; ³all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:1-3, RSV)

Indeed, in this morning's reading, St. John would have us understand that in Jesus, we are not dealing simply with a good man and a good neighbor, but rather, we are dealing with the very Bread of Life come down from heaven.

This is a startling claim. St. John presents to us a man who stands there before the people "in his unmistakable humanity and offers to give the whole world eternal life."⁴ He is a man. He looks like other men. But he stands there offering eternal life to the world. Indeed, he offers *himself* as the very Bread of Life, the bread come down from heaven. There is much here to take in. And so the lectionary is wise in asking us to linger with John 6.

In next week's sermon, God willing, I will develop the theme that Jesus gives us inexhaustible life. Our reading then will lift up that theme, plus it is a theme very much on my mind as I prepare to fly to Minnesota for the funeral of our dear member Ann Wilson. That will be this coming Saturday. Then I mean to stand in this pulpit the next day and preach about inexhaustible life.

But this Sunday, my emphasis is a bit different. In fact, this Sunday is a bit dark and mysterious. It is about the *love* of Christ toward us, which sounds like a nice topic, but in this sermon I take my lead from the Old Testament story of Elijah and another text I want to lift up for you.

⁴ Yeago, David S., "The Bread of Life: Patristic Christology and Evangelical Soteriology in Martin Luther's Sermons on John 6," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 1995.

You have probably noticed over the years that I often start with the Old Testament stories. Those stories often set up a puzzle and a yearning that leads on to Jesus, and so I try always to end by speaking of Jesus. But I often begin with the Old Testament. Here is the important theological principle at work in this way of preaching:

When Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, he received them from Jesus. That is, he was filled with the Word of God, who, in the fullness of time became incarnate of the virgin Mary and was made man — our Lord Jesus. This means that we do not understand the Ten Commandments unless we understand them as the very Word of Jesus. AND we do not understand Jesus unless we understand that he is the one who gives the Ten Commandments.

I mean to speak more of this principle in next Sunday's Bible class. That's at ten a.m. in our church undercroft.

So, let's look at the story of Elijah in this morning's First Lesson and try to see what we can learn about Jesus through that story. In that reading Elijah is on the run. He has plunged from the heights of victory to the depths of despair. I mean to tell you about that soon.

But before turning to Elijah, let me mention another reading very much in the spirit of Elijah and his victory over the prophets of Baal. This is a passage that befell my poor wife, Carol, to read aloud at a recent, fancy, theology conference. She was chaplain for that day of the conference, and the appointed reading for the day was from Deuteronomy 13. That's the way things go in a liturgical church. If the appointed reading is from Deuteronomy 13, then you read it, and that's what Carol did, in her lovely way.

This book I'm holding here is Volume II of a Lutheran prayerbook called *For All the Saints*. There are four volumes altogether, and they include prayers, Bible readings, and meditations for each day of the year. Our member Alan Hoffman, of blessed memory, owned these four volumes, if I recall right. Also our members Davida Goldman and James Miller have this set of prayerbooks.

The appointed Bible reading for Carol's day came from this volume. It was Wednesday of the Third Week after Pentecost. The reading goes this way – Deuteronomy 13:1-11:

“If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, ²and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ ³you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴You

shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him, and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and cleave to him. ⁵But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.

⁶“If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which neither you nor your fathers have known, ⁷some of the gods of the peoples that are round about you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, ⁸you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him; ⁹but you shall kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. ¹⁰You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ¹¹And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and never again do any such wickedness as this among you. (Deuteronomy 13:1-11, RSV)

This firm, unrelenting passage might leave us wondering “What does any of this have to do with Jesus?” Sweet Jesus? I hope to give an answer.

Now, let’s turn to the prophet Elijah. I said that in this morning’s reading he has plunged from the heights of victory to the depths of despair. You have heard his dreadful words:

“It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers.” (1 Kings 19:4, RSV)

He seems to be giving up the fight. Not long ago, in just the preceding chapter, Elijah had been bold and strong and implacable in battle against the four hundred and fifty prophets sponsored by Queen Jezebel. He had challenged the people of Israel to stop being so lukewarm:

And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” And the people did not answer him a word. (1 Kings 18:21, RSV)

The people would not answer Elijah and so he tore into the prophets of Baal. He would not yield them an inch. He would not acknowledge the god they served, Baal, indeed he mocked that strange god and his prophets. Elijah slew them -- all four hundred and fifty of the prophets of Baal. But, naturally, Queen Jezebel became furious at the death of her prophets and swore that she would kill Elijah. So in this morning's passage, Elijah is on the run and he is discouraged. He sits under his broom tree and asks the Lord to take his life.

Again, we could ask the question "What does any of this have to do with Jesus?" With sweet Jesus?

The answer on my heart is that this has very much to do with Jesus. And I think this is an important matter.

To begin developing my idea, let me lift up that old saying about the mother bear: "Do not come between a mother bear and her cub!" This is a strict rule for survival in the wilderness. Don't you dare come between a mother bear and her cub.

Why? Because the mother bear loves her cub, and heaven help the one who threatens that cub.

It is the same with our God. He is a "jealous" God:

⁴You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God... (Exodus 20:4-5, RSV)

The jealousy of our God has nothing at all to do with his ego. Rather, his jealousy entirely reflects his love for his people. So heaven help the prophet, the priest, or the church dignitary who gets between the Lord and his people. Those false gods and false prophets will let the people down in the end, and the Lord will not stand for that. He absolutely will not stand it for it. The Deuteronomy reading in Chapter 13 and Elijah's slaying of the 450 prophets of Baal are but the shadow side of the near desperate love of God for us.

Now, let's speak of Jesus. It is the nature of St. John to press onwards from the good man Jesus to the very Word of God, to the very incarnate God:

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14, RSV)

If the "jealousy" of God, and if Deuteronomy 13, and if the slaying of the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal have *anything* to do with the Word of God, then those fierce things have to do with Jesus, because he *is* the very Word of God that in the fullness of time became incarnate as our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We can notice the pattern in this morning's reading – St. John's pattern of pressing onwards from the mere humanity of Jesus to his eternal divinity. The people have heard Jesus call himself the bread of life "come down from heaven" and, as I have said, they murmur about him:

⁴²They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

Jesus, "the son of Joseph," they can deal with. But the bread of life come down from heaven is a different matter.

Recall that the setting for this saying is the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus feeds five thousand hungry folks with but five barley loaves and two fish. The people are so pleased by this that they want to make him king. But Jesus is after something higher than this. Bread that feeds the body is good and never to be despised. But Jesus offers the very bread of life. And in this, we come inevitably to be speaking of God.

Earlier this week I visited one of our members in the hospital. Being in the hospital is always scary, though this dear person seemed in peaceful and cheerful spirits. Nonetheless it brought a tear to her eye when I told her that this blessed sacrament I was about to give her was not just bread, but was the very Bread of Life. That it was the body of Jesus – the inexhaustible source of life – and that it was becoming mingled with her body, to her salvation.

The dark and mysterious side of this is that Jesus is furious with sin, death, and the devil. Jesus is furious with the illnesses that threaten his people. He is furious with the death that overtook our member Ann Wilson. He will not stand this. He will not abide this. Sin, death, the devil and anyone who stands with them is going to be awfully disappointed in the end. And Jesus, the Bread of Life, means to give life to his people, and he is going to do it!

Do not come between a mother bear and her cub. Do not come between Jesus and his people! Sin, death, and the devil: don't dare and try to do it. Don't venture between Jesus and his people, for he will not stand it. He is the bread of life, inexhaustible life. He is our hope in this world, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.