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

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, John 6. In this passage, many of the people seem to think they have a lockdown argument against Jesus. The passage goes this way:

41 The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” 42 They 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 6:41-42, RSV)

What has gone wrong here is that the people have followed their heads rather than their hearts. And our heads are not all that strong. So the theme of this sermon, and the appeal of this old pastor to you all, is that if you find your heart drawn to Jesus, follow your heart. No matter what your head says, follow your heart!

I mean to examine the argument of the people against Jesus, but before doing that, I bid us ponder what a tragedy is developing right before our eyes in these Bread of Life discourses. By the end of our chapter, Chapter 6, many of the disciples of Jesus will turn and walk away from him. They have heard of his miracles, they might even have witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, but their minds rebel against our Lord. They are too clever by half. And because they trust their heads more than their hearts when it comes to Jesus, they lose him. They separate themselves from him. Our chapter puts it this way:

From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. (John 6:66, KJV)

They walked no more with him. But they could have walked with him. They could have walked with him into a good life here on this earth. They could have been a blessing to their families and to their neighbors in the name of Jesus. They could have walked with Jesus all the way into heaven! But they excluded themselves. They were so smart that they made themselves poor. Let us not do that! When it comes to Jesus, let us follow our hearts.

So, that is my theme for this sermon: follow your heart when it comes to Jesus. Part two of my sermon is a bit technical, but I hope it will help you. It is
about the distinctive and elevated view of St. John about Jesus. But toward the end of the sermon, I mean to return to my theme: Be open to mystery. Trust your heart when it would lead you to Jesus.

Now, part two of the sermon: Let us begin by considering the argument of the people against Jesus. They suppose that they have uncovered incompatible claims about Jesus. They figure that the statements “Jesus has come down from heaven” and “Jesus is the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know” cannot both be true. But they are wrong here. It is not incoherent to believe that both statements are true. To believe both of them might require an expansion of the mind, but it does not require abandoning the mind. It is possible to believe both that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea and that he is the Bread of Life who came down from heaven.

What I am protesting against is how arid the imagination of the people has become. They do not permit themselves to be open to mystery, and thereby, they impoverish themselves. They do not permit themselves to be open to mystery, and thereby they do not permit themselves to be improved and encouraged by mystery.

Now, in defense of the people it must be admitted that Jesus is introducing an extraordinary new idea. It is an idea that is hard for us humans to wrap our minds around. Jesus is saying of himself that he existed before he was born. He existed in heaven before he was born in Bethlehem of Judea.

We must give thanks to St. John for teaching us this. The idea of the preexistence of Jesus is not so clear in the other Gospels. Take St. Luke, for example. I love the Christmas story in St. Luke with all my heart, and yet it is possible to understand that story in a way that does not suppose the preexistence of Jesus. And perhaps early Christians read St. Luke that way—until St. John’s Gospel came along. That is, they might have thought that what happened on Christmas is that at long last a truly holy man was born. That simple: A good man, a holy man, was born, as other people are born. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but he was born—he entered life—as other people are born. They could have then believed other things in the Apostles’ Creed: they could have believed that our Lord Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, that he was crucified, died and was buried, rose again from death and ascended into heaven, and that one day he will come again with power and glory to judge the living and the dead. They could believe all of that without necessarily believing that Jesus existed before he was born on that first Christmas.

And consider the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark. In that Gospel, Jesus suddenly appears on the scene as a full grown man, ready to be baptized by John the Baptist (Mark 1:9). There is no suggestion that Jesus came down from heaven. It is possible to read Matthew, Mark, and Luke without concluding that Jesus existed before he was born. St. Paul seems to believe in the preexistence of Jesus, but not in the extraordinary way of St. John. For St.
Paul, Jesus is the “first-born of all creation” (Colossians 1:15) — the first of God’s creatures. But St. John comes along and, behold! In the very first chapter John teaches us that Jesus existed even before there were any creatures at all. And so we read the magnificent opening words from John 1:

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)

Then, skipping ahead a few verses to verse fourteen, we read about Jesus—the Jesus the people in today’s Gospel story knew to have grown up in the household of Mary and Joseph:

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)

In the Creed we confess that Jesus, following his resurrection, ascended into heaven. And certainly that is true. But from St. John we learn that Jesus also descended from heaven. He descended from heaven when he was born in Bethlehem.

In today’s Gospel Lesson from John 6, the people murmur against Jesus because he said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:41). But there is no problem here. Jesus is simply speaking the stone cold truth. He came down from heaven and he was born in Bethlehem. What the people imagined to be incoherent is not so. It is a mystery—a wondrous mystery— but it is not absurd. Jesus is, as the Creed says,

...eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

True, this is a BIG idea about Jesus: that he is “true God from true God,” but perhaps it is not an entirely strange idea for Israel. The prophet Isaiah is the one who most beautifully sums up the yearning and the prayers of Israel and so speaks of the descent of God:

O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence – (Isaiah 64:1, RSV)
In Jesus of Nazareth, God has done this: he has come down to earth. In the multiplication of the few loaves and fishes, God has come down to earth, with blessing for his people. But the people end up depriving themselves of this blessing because they are, oh, so smart – excessively smart, ruinously smart!

I do not have any real interest in criticizing the people, or their logic. I sympathize with the people. I understand that in John Chapter 6, Jesus is asking a lot of the people. He is asking them to think thoughts that probably go beyond them. So it is not my intention to criticize the minds of the people. Rather my intention, my hope, and my prayer is that you and I will listen to our hearts, even more than to our heads, when it comes to Jesus.

Imagine sitting at the Pastor’s Booth, as Vicar Caleb and I do. We cannot answer every question that sophisticated people might ask us about the faith of the church. We do the best we can, and we have quite a lot of training in explaining and defending Christian faith, but we are not saints or angels and we do not always know the perfect answer to give. So we answer the best we can. But all along we sit there wishing that people would simply give Jesus a chance. If there are mysteries in the Christian faith, we wish the world to be open to those mysteries. We wish ourselves to be even more open to those mysteries. Because those mysteries can transform us for the good.

You mothers and fathers: Naturally you might be intimidated in trying to speak up for Christian faith when so much of popular culture and perhaps the schools your children attend do not have the time of day for Jesus. But do the best you can. It is worth it. Try to praise and defend Jesus even though you might not be able to answer every question. And in everything you do, tried to draw your children to Jesus. When your answers run dry, at least you can go on walking with Jesus, and in the walking, you might help shepherd your children along toward our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.