

Amazing Bread, How Sweet the Taste
The Bread Miracle in the Desert (John 6:1-15)

It was springtime.

The Passover feast would soon begin.

The flowers appeared in the land and the sumptuous velvet grasses carpeted the hills.

Jesus and his apostles sailed across the waters of Galilee to its western shore. They aimed for a quiet area where they could enjoy some solitude and ponder the mystery of spring and the wonder of God.

A multitude of people had arrived in Capernaum, coming to hear the hope-filled words of Jesus and bringing their sick to be touched by his healing hand. They discovered that Jesus had just departed for the western shore, and they could see his boat heading for the small fishing port at Bethsaida Julias, just opposite Capernaum. The lake of Galilee is relatively narrow at this northern end. This meant that if the people walked briskly enough around the lake they could be at the other side not long after Jesus arrived.

From his boat Jesus could see the long procession of people, marching in hope, singing the psalms of desire for God. The hunger in their hearts for the bread of God pressed them to journey to Jesus. The shadows in their inner lives urged them to walk toward the light. Jesus watched that stream of humanity determined to find him and willing to walk many miles to be in his presence. Their tender faith transformed them into pilgrims. Jesus felt great compassion for them for he saw how much care they needed. They were sheep without a shepherd. An inner spiritual drive pushed them to experience his presence. They needed spiritual food. Jesus would not disappoint them.

The majestic line of 5,000 pilgrims met Jesus at the western shore. Like a good shepherd he led them up the nearby mountain where he sat down and spoke to them of hope, forgiveness, and salvation. Some have wondered how he could be heard by everyone in a throng like this. In ancient times, a system of heralds, or "loud speakers," made this possible. Placed strategically throughout the crowd, the heralds relayed the message to the vast assembly.

In this situation, Christ's speaking style would be relaxed, leisurely, unhurried. He would paint a word picture, an aphorism or a wisdom saying in a condensed, powerful sentence. Like wind brushing over a field of grain, his word was carried by the heralds to his listeners. Flowing back to him from this vast assembly was a murmur of assent and an audible praise of God. This was a dialogue of faith. St. Matthew described a similar situation in his record of the Sermon on the Mount and Luke did the same in his memoir of the Sermon in the Valley. John does not report the words of Christ's communion with his beloved people in this mountain scene. He will wait until after the bread miracle to chronicle in splendid cadences the Bread of Life dialogue at the site of the Capernaum synagogue.

Only imagination can supply what Jesus probably said here. We will go no further than to suggest that he meditated with his spiritually hungry audience on the glory of the forthcoming Passover. This would include a reflection on the gracious acts of God that led their ancestors to freedom across the Red Sea and to a love bond with the Lord at Sinai after a pilgrimage across the desert. He would have applied that message to their present situation and proclaimed the first truths about the new Passover to be created by him. We will go no further than to suggest that he meditated with his spiritually hungry audience to the glory of the forthcoming Passover.

There was no Passover without a meal. He asked Philip where food could be found for so great a crowd. Philip shrugged and said that even a year's worth of salary would not buy enough food to feed a group like this. Andrew pointed to a boy who had five barley loaves and two fish. What good would that be for this throng?

Jesus ordered the people to sit down on the lush spring grass. He took the loaves, blessed them and distributed them to the people. He did the same with the fish. His bread miracle fed everyone. There was enough left over to fill twelve baskets. He had fed their souls with his nourishing word. Then he hosted a kind of outdoor "Passover Meal," a divine picnic, in which he ministered to the physical hunger of his people. He witnessed his concern for the total well being of all these men, women, and children.

Jesus' bread miracle in the wilderness matched his wine miracle at Cana. Taken together they formed the core symbolism of the Eucharist, of which he would speak in his Bread of Life dialogue. It is no mistake that he treated the bread with steps associated with Eucharistic ritual. His "taking, blessing, breaking and giving" the bread modeled what would be done in the first Christian Eucharists and in our own today. In the synoptic gospels, the Lord's Supper takes place in an Upper Room. In John's gospel, the prefigurement of the Lord's Supper takes place on a mountain at Passover time.

Christ's words thrilled the hearts of his listeners. His Bread Miracle unintentionally fired their practical need for a political messiah. In the ecstasy of that mellow evening on a green mountainside, they surged forward with the intention of lifting him up on their shoulders and carrying him back to Capernaum as their messianic king.

They shouted “Prophet,” meaning messiah. They missed the point of his ministry that afternoon. Jesus had no intention of fulfilling their false expectations. He mysteriously disappeared and went to a place of solitude on the mountain.

Jesus Walks Across the Water (John 6:16-21)

That evening the apostles boarded the boat and sailed back to Capernaum. Jesus stayed on the mountain for a night of prayer. After the apostles were a few miles out to sea, darkness fell. Angry clouds and winds brought a sudden and dangerous storm. Though they were used to the sea as fishermen, and despite the fact they had weathered many storms, they always feared catastrophe when put at the mercy of the sea.

They had sailing skills for maneuvering and courage to forge ahead, but they were all too aware of the frail hold their little boat had when faced with the unpredictable push of the winds and the threat of being swamped in the waves. The synoptic accounts of this storm at sea clearly point out the panic of the apostles in the face of this life-threatening situation.

Thus the apostles found themselves in an extreme crisis. They faced the possibility of death by drowning. Intense and palpable fear gripped them. It has been said that nothing concentrates the mind more than facing the barrel of a gun in the hand of a murderer. The fact of dying by drowning just as surely focused the minds of the apostles. The basic need for survival blocked out all other thoughts, but also released fundamental, inner religious attitudes.

In the Second World War the chaplains noted there were “no atheists in foxholes.” The threat of death quickens one’s thoughts of God. Even the hardest secularist will suddenly say, “Lord, save me!” Or burst out with, “O God!” which is exactly what the apostles did say in the synoptic versions of this story. Potential shipwreck experiences have a way of stirring up dormant faith.

In John’s account there is no reference to the calming of the waters, nor is there a description of apostles terrorized by the storm. That part of the story is assumed. John knew that his readers and listeners would be familiar with a narrative as vivid as this one. So he moved immediately to the faith experience which is found in all the reports. John did note the fear of the apostles, but it was not of the storm. Instead they were frightened by the vision of Jesus walking toward them across the waters.

On the one hand, they had the childish fear of seeing a ghost. On the other hand, they experienced awe, a tremendous sense of fearful wonder in beholding the divine majesty of Jesus mastering the water, doing what only God could do. The storm at sea had become an occasion for a revelation of the glory of Jesus. The apostles experienced his divine presence. Jesus confirmed the revelation with his words, “Do not be afraid. I AM ” (John 6:30). The “I am” is a form of the divine name received by Moses at the scene of the Burning Bush.

In John's gospel, Jesus will often use the "I am" statements, unmistakable references to the Word of God become flesh.

In the roaring of the waters, in the midst of death, in the life-threatening crisis, Jesus revealed his glory and saving love. He begged them to let go of their fear and invited them to a faith commitment to him. As God the Father had led the people of Israel safely through the raging waters of the Red Sea, so now God the Son escorted the apostles safely through the storm waters of Lake Galilee. "They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading" (John 6:21).

John's description is resolutely supernatural. His view of the miracle is not the calming of the waters, so much as a wondrous transfer of the alarmed apostles to the safety of the shore, like a repeat performance of the Passover delivery of Israel at the Red Sea. Still, his attention is less on a miracle than on the revelation of the glory of Jesus and his call of the apostles to faith. If in any way they shared the mistaken notion of messiah proclaimed at the bread miracle, they should be disabused of that idea in this event. Jesus is not a mere earthly king, but the Lord who has come to love them into salvation from death and sin.

The Dialogue on the Amazing Bread (John 6:22-71)

The scene shifts to Capernaum, a northern town near the place where the Jordan flows in Galilee Lake. This prosperous community owned the Seven Wells whose plentiful waters, conveyed by an aqueduct, were used to irrigate the nearby plain and drive pottery and tanning mills. They fed a cistern which provided water for an elegant, mosaic-inlaid Roman bath. Today we can find ruins there of an ornate second century synagogue, built on the ruins of a simpler one that dated from Christ's time.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have collected ancient millstones, used for grinding wheat and barley flour, and brought them to Capernaum and placed them around this synagogue. Those solid old millstones stir up pictures of wheat harvests, the feel of fresh flour, the smell of bread baking, the hearty satisfaction of a meal of bread and lamb and salad and wine. For the modern pilgrim they evoke the memory of the dialogue on the Bread of Life which could very well have taken place in the assembly area outside the synagogue.

A Passover Process

Jesus proceeded to take his listeners through what might be called a "Passover Process." This means he offered them the opportunity to pass over their old ways of living, feeling and thinking to a new approach. His process consisted of four steps.

- (1). Let go of false views of religion.
- (2). Become involved with the person of Jesus.
- (3). Prepare to be broken and given.
- (4). Surrender to the person of Jesus.

1. Let Go of False Views of Religion (John 6:22-34). Jesus' bread miracle had captivated them. They failed to make him a king, but they could not resist being near him and raising him to the status of a religious celebrity. They surged into the assembly area by the Capernaum synagogue, where they continued to project their false expectations on him. Jesus had subdued their political passions for the moment. Now he must disengage them from making him a cult figure, a kind of one-man spiritual welfare agency.

His warm sermon made them feel good. His bread miracle unintentionally generated a false dependency on him. For them he was not really a person with whom they could get involved, so much as a mood satisfier and a stomach filler. They were consumers of religious emotion and wonder bread. They had an agenda based on self satisfaction. Jesus had a mission founded on a challenging personal relationship with them.

He quietly led them into the first stage of a liberating Passover process. Jesus began by getting them to talk about their reactions to him. Why were they so enthusiastically seeking him? What did they think of the experiences of the loaves and fishes? They said that not since Moses had fed their ancestors with manna had anyone nourished them so marvelously. Jesus proceeded to help them see the limitations of bread satisfaction. Bread and fish take care of a basic need. But what do you do after you eat? What happens between meals? Are there not other needs to be met? What about financial, cultural and spiritual needs? What about love that never fails?

They all knew that the bread from their bakeries bore the seal of the baker. Perhaps Jesus held up a loaf of bread for them to inspect. A visual aid to fix their attention. He might have pointed to the seal and commented that this loaf came from Josiah the baker. The seal identified the baker and stood for quality bread. Jesus applied this visual aid to the desert manna. God was the real "baker" of that bread. Moses was simply the delivery man.

Carefully, Jesus led them to see that the bread he had given them on the mountain was like the manna. It offered only temporary satisfaction. He could give them "God Bread" that would satisfy their need for a love that never fails. When love is the issue, the seal of God the "baker" will be found.

Jesus touched their basic needs. They were charmed by the idea of a bread that would keep them from ever being hungry again. They were warmed by the feeling that their desire for boundless affection could actually be met.

In their minds, they mixed up miracle bread and the love offering, and they were not yet aware of the faith challenge and personal sacrifice that would be asked of them. Innocently, but avidly, they urged Jesus to give them this new kind of bread-love.

They took the first tentative step in the Passover Process.

2. *Become Involved With the Person of Jesus (John 6:35-50)* Then Jesus brought the whole discussion to the personal level. He told them that the bread image should lead them to think of a person. Not just any person, but God. “I AM the bread of life....I came down from heaven” (John 6:35,38). These were overpowering words for them, filled with mystery. They felt disoriented. They saw a human being. They knew of his modest reputation as a competent carpenter. Yet in some startling way he had become an inspiring preacher and a remarkable healer.

He had resisted their attempt to make him a political leader. They could accept that. The risks were high. And he still had a mother to look after. But now he had raised new issues they never dreamed of. He was applying the “I AM” to himself. He was the Son of God the Father and came to do the Father’s will. He spoke of personal intimacy with God. The extraordinary revelation subdued them momentarily. They became profoundly reflective. Cool breezes came from Galilee. The late afternoon sun warmed the toast colored stones of the synagogue. A lone eagle floated in the sky. Silence gripped them.

What should they make of his claims? Had he let his fame go to his head? Prophets had talked about personal intimacy with God, but they always kept the distinction between God and themselves. Their own present experience of religion was mostly doing the rituals, saying prayers, trying to live good moral lives and tying feasts to cultural celebrations.

Jesus understood their inability to grasp and accept the mystery he had revealed to them. He did not proceed to explain the mystery, but rather intensified his personal appeal to them. He had shown himself to be a caring person, nourishing their spirits and bodies. He invited them to friendship with him, a relationship based on trust. He asked them to believe in him. If they can believe in his love, they will be able to appreciate his mystery and come to understand his truth.

Love can penetrate the darkness of mystery. Love has an inner light that enables the lover to accept and comprehend divine truth. By reaching into their hearts to form a love bond with him, Jesus hoped to initiate them into believing in his mystery and truth. To be involved with him as a person meant they had to shed the very self interest that had attracted them to him. He was asking them to love him and accept his love.

But they wanted to use him, not love him. Absorbed in consuming his sermons and miracle bread, they could only think of exploiting him. Nonetheless, Jesus held them by his presence and he tried to bring them to a third stage of the Passover Process—the most difficult phase of all.

3. *Prepare to be Broken and Given (John 6:51-58)* Jesus never believed in hiding the truth from people. Nor was he shy about appealing to people’s capacity for heroism.

He knew how great was the potential for human courage, and he understood the secret thrill every person feels when challenged to be brave and sacrificial. He was also aware of how scared those same people will feel when confronted with the decision to act on a command to live up to a high ideal. He had moved inside the Capernaum Synagogue for this part of the discourse. Underneath that waning afternoon sun, which shed a mellow glow within that room, Jesus stirred up exactly those conflicting emotions of courage and glory, of fear and flight.

He used the magnificent language of Eucharist to elevate them to a level of mystery and a level of choice they had never known before. Even as he honored their deepest drive to be noble, he risked surfacing their embarrassing wish to be weak and evasive.

Scholars have often pointed out that John's gospel has no narrative of the Words of Institution of the Eucharist. Instead, John's teaching about Christ's institution of the Eucharist occurred here in the Bread of Life discourse. What made its presence here so exalting and spiritually compelling was its integration into a profound communion between him and the congregation in "Synagogue Square" at Capernaum on a splendid afternoon by the refreshing waters of Galilee. What grips the reader is the extraordinary and forthright supernatural probing Jesus undertakes in order to awaken the deepest layer of their capacity for mystery and courage.

This is the context for hearing his words, otherwise so alien to the community at Capernaum. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (John 6:54-55). The wine miracle at Cana and the bread miracle on the mountain were symbolic preparations for this teaching of Jesus. He spoke unequivocally now. The bread *is* body. The wine *is* his blood. Divine life is received when we eat his body and drink his blood.

Today it is popular to thin out the mysteries of Jesus. The assumption is that modern people are either too sophisticated to believe such truths, or else too weak to absorb such mighty realities. Some have argued that even Jesus never laid so much divine truth on his listeners during his lifetime. Instead these were teachings given later in the early church and simply reconstructed by John to have occurred in Christ's earthly ministry. The assumption is that Jesus was astute enough to know such truths would have been too much for his listeners without extensive preparation.

But most people, both now and then, are much stronger than we give them credit for. Moreover, the human spirit is far more receptive to divine reality than the advocates of hesitancy contend. God made the human spirit to thirst for God. Jesus honored that Capernaum congregation with revelations about his divinity and the Eucharist. He was not afraid of "spiritual overload." He had a great respect for the capabilities of the human spirit.

Besides, there had been remote and proximate preparation for his revelations. The history of salvation, the visions of the prophets and the cumulative faith of over a thousand years of communion with the God of the covenant were the remote preparation. His own ministry of word and sign, as well as of personal outreach, was the proximate preparation. God's people were accustomed to divine revelation. They may have resisted it, or not lived by it, but they were culturally and spiritually equipped for it.

As if the revelations were not enough, Jesus pointed out that he would be broken (his body to be eaten—his blood to be drunk) and given “for the life of the world.” His doctrinal teaching was essentially tied to a moral challenge. The Eucharist and the passion go together. Eucharistic living involves sacrificial love. His followers would also have to be willing to be broken and given so that love and salvation will be available to the world. Jesus had not spared them the strenuous demands of the third stage of the Passover Process.

4. *Surrender to the Person of Jesus (John 6:60-71)* In John's gospel there is frequent reference to the glory-presence of Jesus. We all know people who have the gift of personal presence. When they enter a room, they “fill” it. Jesus possessed this charisma, not in the sense of bowling people over, but by projecting a warm intensity, an attractive affection that drew people to him. Quite possibly his glory-presence never burned with more warm-heartedness than at this moment in his revelation about the Eucharist.

He thirsted and yearned for their personal surrender to him because of the magnificent benefits his splendid love offering would produce for them. He did not argue or try to force them. He rested in silence and awaited their response. Many decided that his invitation and challenge was too hard for them. They could not accept it. Some of them were shocked by what he demanded of them. Jesus commented that only a faith surrender would reveal the meaning of the mystery for them.

Jesus had risked losing disciples that day. Many of them left him. He turned to the twelve. “Do you also want to leave?” Simon Peter answered, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67-69). This is a rich variation of Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:16). Peter's faith here embraces the Eucharist as well as the divinity and messiahship of Jesus. With the grace of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, Peter will begin to appreciate what he is saying at Capernaum. The seed of faith that day will flower after Easter.

In the Last Supper accounts in the synoptic gospels, Jesus began by referring to one who would betray him. In this Eucharistic Passover Process, Jesus also speaks of a betrayer. “Is not one of you a devil?” (John 6:70). So ends this powerful discourse on the Bread of Life. Amazing Bread, how sweet the taste! Jesus carefully spelled out his revelation in personal terms. He asked for belief and surrender to him.

Some believed and some did not. That will mark the whole history of Christianity from Capernaum to this present hour—even to the last moment of history.

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