

Church of the Crossroads
Third Sunday of Easter
April 6, 2008
Neal MacPherson

BREAD OF LIFE; BREAD OF EMPIRE

Isaiah 55:1–3a
Psalm 146
Luke 24:13–35

If you listened carefully, you will have noticed that all three readings for this morning contain images of bread and food.

We begin with the passage from Isaiah.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy? —Is 55:1–2

Walter Brueggemann, in his usual perceptive way, points out that this passage occurs between two other passages. It reflects the first, and anticipates the third.¹ The passage reflects the past experience of the ancient Hebrews receiving manna in the wilderness following their exodus from imperial Egypt. When the Isaiah passage was composed, the people were again in a wilderness, this time the wilderness in and around the city of Babylon, to which they had been exiled following their defeat by the Babylonian Empire in the 6th century BCE. “As you once received manna in the wilderness long ago, look again to the bread God supplies, freely and without price,” says the prophet. “Do not become dependent upon the bread of the Empire.”

This passage also looks forward to a future time in that same exile, recorded in Daniel Chapter 1, when the imperial government of the Babylonians, the manager of the exile, seeks to recruit young men for government service. When the recruits arrive at the training camp, Daniel

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) see 129–132.

and his vigilant colleagues refuse the rich imperial food which was set before them. They opt for a diet of vegetables, which in a metaphoric sense is the diet of faithfulness. When basic training is completed, Daniel and his friends are found to be in ten times better shape than the recruits who had eaten the rich seductive food of the Empire.

These are amazing stories and images. As I have often said, we too find ourselves in the midst of an empire, an American empire, and as men and women trying to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we often feel like exiles in our own land. In the midst of our exile, the Empire continues to entice us with its bread as a way to divert our attention and persuade us to buy into its ways. May I point to two examples? The first is the \$600.00 that is being thrown to us as a way to ease our fears about the recession in which we find ourselves and entice us to consume again. However, the real economic question we confront is not the recession that now besets us but the overall structure of our economic life. In the midst of our recession, there is scarcely a critical voice being raised about the great market God who continues to say, "Let the market place decide." Some voices are calling for more regulation of the investment banking system—voices that will surely be opposed. In the absence of regulation, Bear Stearns did what it wanted, all in the name of greed, only then to be bailed out by our tax money, while the victims of sub-prime mortgage schemes continue to lose their homes. In the meanwhile, we will have our \$600 so that we can go on with business as usual.

A second example of the bread the Empire gives is the tax-exempt status given to religious institutions. Our institutions, over the years, have become dependent upon this tax-exempt status. The prophetic voice that we are called to exercise is, as a result, silenced, for fear that we will lose our status. As a result, the United Church of Christ now has to obtain legal counsel in order to defend to the IRS its decision to invite Barack Obama to speak at the last General Synod, even though the invitation was extended before the time he entered the presidential race. Religious institutions must now live in fear of what the IRS might do. This, too, is a consequence of our depending upon the bread of empire.

Our second reading, the Psalm we said responsively, echoes Isaiah. The Psalmist advises us not to place our trust

. . . in princes,
 in mortals, in whom there is no help.
 When their breath departs, they return
 to the earth;
 on that very day their plans perish. —Ps 146:3–4

We are, rather, to place our trust in God

who made heaven and earth,
 the sea, and all that is in them;
 who keeps faith forever;
 who executes justice for the oppressed;
 who gives food to the hungry. —Ps 146:6–7

There is, my friends, an alternative bread available to us, a bread not of empire, but of life. This is the bread offered to exiles, a ten-grain whole wheat bread in contrast to that lifeless white bread we find on store shelves—a bread that can be purchased without money and without price. This is food that lasts and is not the quick food of McDonalds, ready made for the empire. This is the bread of the Eucharist we break every time we gather around the Lord's Table.

This is bread that is offered to all, which then may be received by all. This is bread enough—not too much—but which can satisfy the real hunger within. This is the bread that signals that day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. This is the bread of justice. It is bread that the empire simply cannot give. It can only be given by God.

This is the bread that is broken by the One who came to give life and life abundantly through the giving of himself on a cross, who on that cross represents us in our yearning for newness of life, and also God who in love comes to suffer with us and for us, offering us hope for despair, and life for death.

This is the bread that is celebrated in the story of the Emmaus Road. Two disciples are walking to a village called Emmaus. One is named Cleopas. The other has no name (could it be you, me?) They are talking about all the events around the death of Jesus. A stranger joins them and inquires as to what they are talking about. They proceed to relate to the stranger the sequence of events, including the discovery of the empty tomb

by the women. The stranger then interprets how all these things were foretold in the scriptures. The stranger seems to be going on before them, but in an act of hospitality, the two disciples invite him to stay with them. He did so, and

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

—Lk 24:30–31

They then returned to Jerusalem and reported to the eleven and their companions how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

About that part of the story that says that Jesus vanished from their sight—I believe Luke is saying something important to us. Jesus vanishes because Jesus is no longer going to be physically present with the community gathered in his name. From this time on, he will not be known in a physical sense—his presence will be known in the breaking of the bread.

This is the bread of life, the bread that gives life. This is the bread we are invited to break and live by. For in the breaking of it, we know the presence of Christ in our lives and in the community of the church. And we are given sustenance for our faithful witness in the midst of the empire.

As for the bread of the Empire, we perhaps cannot extricate ourselves from it entirely, but let us never live as though it can give us life. For it cannot. Only God can give fullness of life. It is God whom we are to trust. It is the bread of the Lord's Table that gives us life. Let us therefore eat of it always, and live. Amen.