

Meeting the Carnal God

The passage from John's gospel today continues Jesus' presentation of the metaphor of the bread from heaven—the living manna. It again begins with the last verse from the text for last Sunday: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." John is presenting this teaching as a matter of life or death. In much the same manner that the choice was spoken of to their ancestors in the desert journey—there is a choice before them. Then they were told choose Yahweh or choose death—no in betweens—no maybes—just two options. Here the choice Jesus offers is to believe what he is telling them and receive eternal life—or not. These statements by Jesus about being the bread that came down from heaven has provoked complaints and grumbling from the crowd to which Jesus is speaking. This crowd who had originally come seeking Jesus to have him again provide the more usual bread for them—that bread which satisfied their physical hunger, but only temporarily. John tells us some in the crowd take offense at this claim—this claim of being the bread of heaven and of coming down from heaven. They make the connection to the manna provided in the desert but associate that bread with Moses—not Yahweh. They feel their knowledge of Jesus, of the family of Joseph and Mary who raised him precludes him from being comparable to Moses much less something greater. They scoff at his claim to have come down from heaven. Their disdain grows as he restates this claim and continues by stating "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." When he puts this gift offer in terms of his flesh to be eaten his words cause consternation in the crowd. Those who spoke up now began to argue among themselves questioning how this could possibly be. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The audience is hearing this as being literal and cannibalistic—eating of flesh in a literal sense—and really when told that they are to eat him in order to obtain this eternal life—it probably sounds surreal and repulsive. That idea of eating flesh does sound strange in this context of bread which satisfies permanently and gives life. When they question how what he has said can be, Jesus doubles down by saying to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." Talking of eating flesh and drinking blood brings to mind horror movies, not the love of God or Sunday morning worship, but that is what these verses proclaim. Yet in these verses we have the essentials of the sacrament we celebrate as the Lord's Supper—the holy Eucharist. In reading this text we can clearly hear the echo of the words of institution for the sacrament. Although the words of institution come from the letter to the Corinthians and not the gospels themselves, they describe the events of the last meal which Jesus ate with his disciples. Take eat. This is my body broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Drink of it. In John's gospel, these words are a foreshadowing of the coming crucifixion when Jesus will make that trip to the cross for the world's sake. We live so long after all of these events and are so familiar with them that we cannot appreciate how shocking this claim that Jesus makes is to those who first hear it. Jesus has moved from demonstrating that he offers bread to them with the feeding of the five thousand into saying, "I am the bread of life." He moves from claiming that he speaks the word of God, to claiming that he is the bread—he is the Word of God. When he says "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

he is going beyond the imagery of the Hebrew Exodus tradition where God provided manna and fresh water. Here Jesus is scandalously claiming to be God's Word brought to life. The crowd, hearing this claim is indeed scandalized and repulsed as they respond by asking that question about how it could be that Jesus would give them his flesh to eat. And, unlike many of the parables where Jesus explains his teaching, in this instance there is no clarification which moves the image away from the literal. Instead Jesus paints a graphic picture of eating flesh and drinking blood. We know that Jesus is speaking of the cross, but the crowd doesn't. We know that Jesus is saying that his life is offered as nourishment, like bread from heaven. This is a visceral offering. It's not something to be coolly considered from the religion section of the library. Instead, that he is God's word spoken to us, not just God's messenger but God's very message of love is what is central to understanding this passage. But the crowd doesn't have this information. Jesus continues by saying, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." What those people, including the disciples hear at this point is that Jesus wants them to gobble him up. Not to regard him from a distance but to take his life into theirs, as though they were eating a good meal. The message Jesus is bringing is about this idea of abiding—of dwelling within—which is still the call to us today. We are called to invite Jesus into our lives in a visceral sense. We are often taught to approach information—as data—as something impersonal that we wish to know. We approach with cool, dispassionate regard, asking questions from a distance, weighing evidence. Perhaps today we do fact checking online with Wikipedia instead of the World Book we have on our bookshelves. And sometimes we are tempted to approach religious life in this same manner, as gatherers and analyzers of information. But we are not meant simply to grow into more religious people who can discuss God intellectually. We are meant to grow more into the likeness of Christ through this abiding process. We are to grasp, to take hold of and incorporate into our being this bread of life which nourishes eternally. We are to come to know this Jesus. Having information about someone is not knowing them. Knowing someone is having a relationship with them. Knowing about someone can give us an indication of whether or not we want to know someone, but it is only through spending time together that we come to know them. When Jesus makes these claims he is telling the crowd and his disciples and us that there is no remaining at a distance with him. There is only the partaking of what is offered—and this story from John 6 pushes us to confess that the same is true with knowing Christ. Will Willimon once wrote: "There is no knowing who the Christ is without visceral, total engagement. We will not be able to comprehend him by sitting back, comfortable in the pew, and coolly considering him as if he were an abstract, disembodied idea." That is the reality of the opening words of John—and the Word became flesh. The Lord we know in Jesus is carnal—became flesh and then invited us to come and eat and drink of that body made of flesh. In the Lord's Supper, by some mystery, we take the life of Christ into ourselves, and in that way learn to know Christ better. We encounter Christ in worship in all its forms, whether Sacrament, preaching, Scripture, prayer or music. And we also encounter Christ in one another in this place because we are the body of Christ. But we should also encounter Christ outside the walls of this church. Christ came into the world. Christ is also God made present in the everyday world, in the ordinary places and people of our lives. I think that most of us have had the experience of sensing the presence of Christ when watching a glorious sunrise or sunset—perhaps on a vacation to the beach or the mountains; or perhaps coming upon a particularly beautiful view while hiking or driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

But encountering Jesus does not just happen in beautiful places. If we are abiding in Jesus, then we are sent to go to the places where Jesus went and expect to find him there. Yes, Jesus worshiped God in the Temple with his own people. He also went to the mountaintop and prayed and spent time with just his best friends. But he also crossed boundaries of ethnicity, gender, class and geography and no matter who he met on the other side, he showed them God's love. He ate with all kinds of people—no matter how bad their neighborhood or reputation, he went to where they were and spent time with them. He still does. When we encounter people who are different from us, there too, we can encounter Jesus. As Jesus desires to abide in us and invites us to abide in him, he also abides in those who are not like us. Jesus tells us "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." The focus of this complete text is not really about bread, but about the source of life. It is about our relationship with Jesus who is the bread of life himself. Jesus himself, our Carnal God, meets us where we are, but does not leave us there. Instead, Jesus comes and dwells within—does not stay at a distance but becomes a part of our lives. This life-giving nourishment changes our lives and we will try to take on the words and deeds of Christ ourselves through this abiding presence. This text certainly reminds us of the Eucharist, but it is not primarily about the Eucharist. It is primarily about Jesus himself as the food of eternal life given by the Father. Jesus, the incarnate God, the God who as a Christmas carol proclaims is God now in flesh appearing, wants us to feed upon him—to take him into our lives. This is the gift and the promise that we receive from our carnal—our incarnate God—that if we abide in him we will be nourished and have life eternal. Thanks be to God.