

“Imperishable Food”

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

One of the most basic rules of food preservation – that milk has to be refrigerated so that it doesn’t spoil – was challenged several years ago when Parmalat introduced its “long life milk” that it claimed could be stored unrefrigerated on a shelf for months. This milk was treated using a process called UHT – “Ultra-High Temperature” – that supposedly made the milk safe to store far longer than conventional milk products. From all accounts, the company’s claims were validated, and its milk could indeed enjoy a “long life” without being kept cold.

This new variety of milk was one of several advancements in the field of food preparation. We take for granted our ability to store many food items almost indefinitely; we can keep canned goods in our pantry for a long time, place food in vacuum-sealed containers that will maintain its freshness, and fill our refrigerators and freezers with food that we can keep in edible condition far longer than our ancestors, who battled with food spoilage through means as diverse as salting, cold cellars, and relying on the iceman to keep their food cold in the icebox. The availability of nonperishable food and food preparation advancements has given us the ability to store food for extended periods of time and enjoy seasonal foods long after their peak growing periods have ended.

But even “nonperishable” foods don’t last forever. Canned goods may be stored for long periods of time, but they have a “shelf life” that will eventually expire. Frozen food can be kept for many weeks, but it will deteriorate to the point where its taste and freshness have been diminished. And all foods that need to be kept refrigerated or frozen are at the mercy of our local hydro companies; as Susan and I learned when we lost power for days after Hurricane Sandy in 2012, without power all of that “nonperishable” food in the refrigerator will perish in a matter of hours. These food items may be “nonperishable,” but they are not “imperishable,” food that will never spoil or be rendered inedible.

The bread that Jesus shares with the multitude was a perishable commodity that needed to be gathered up lest it spoil in the fields; after the thousands had been fed, Jesus instructs his disciples to “gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” (John 6:13). Even though this bread was the result of Jesus’ miraculous intervention, it was still perishable bread that had a limited shelf life, similar to the manna that God provided for the people of Israel in the wilderness, which was given with the instruction to “let no one leave any of it over until morning” (Exodus 16:19), because the leftover manna “bred worms and became foul.” (16:20). The bread that God provides in both situations satisfied the hunger of the crowds; but it was not the bread of which Jesus will speak to the crowds who “got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.” (John 6:24). Their question to Jesus – “Rabbi, when did you come here?” (6:25) – reminds the reader that they are ignorant of the miracle in 6:16-21, where Jesus brings his disciples safely through a storm at sea as he announces to them that “it is I; do not be afraid” (6:20); they did not hear Jesus identifying himself as “I am” (*ego eimi*), the very name the Lord uses to identify himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus does not answer their question about his arrival at Capernaum; instead, he redirects the conversation to the crowd’s motives in seeking him:

- “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” – 6:26-27.

In John's Gospel, "signs" (*semeion*) are acts related to the one who does them; their quality derives from the quality of their author. The many signs of Jesus are distinctly miraculous, but they bear a messianic character inasmuch as they put an end to disease and want:

- "[Nicodemus] came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'" – 3:2.
- "The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household. Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee." – 4:53-54.
- "Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided." – 9:16.

Jesus' response to the crowd is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where he uses the word "sign," inviting comparison with the two Cana signs. In the changing of water into wine, the disciples saw a sign of Jesus' glory (2:1-11); for the royal official whose son was healed, it was a sign of Jesus' ability to give life (4:46-54). In both instances, the result was that all believed in Jesus. The crowd that stands before him, on the other hand, can respond to the feeding miracle only in terms of their full stomachs; their subsequent question, "*What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?*" (6:30) is evidence that they do not see the miracle as a sign.

Jesus calls their attention to the food that was gathered up after the multitude was fed as "food that perishes," and contrasts the crowd's work for such food with another kind of food, which he describes as "*the food that endures for eternal life*" (6:27). His words are similar to the invitation to abundant life spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

- "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who 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? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." – Isaiah 55:1-3a.

Jesus' reference to "food that perishes" again is linked to his instruction to gather the leftover bread after the feeding of the multitude; *apollyni* can be translated "perish" or "be lost." The "food that endures for eternal life," like the "living water" Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman at the well, comes only from the Son of Man ("*The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*" – 4:14); it is from the one on whom "*God the Father has set his seal,*" bestowing on him a formal mark of identification as God's own. The Son of Man is the giver of a different kind of food, a food that is "imperishable."

The crowd once again misunderstands what Jesus is saying to them; they transform his instruction to "*not work for the food that perishes*" into a question about their performance of works, so that the grace of Jesus' words disappears: "*What must we do to perform the works of God?*" (6:28). The crowd's question implies a contingency: they will do God's work only if Jesus does God's work first and performs a sign: "*What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe? What work are you performing?*" (6:30). They shift the burden of who is to work from themselves to Jesus. Like the ancestors to whom they refer in v. 31 ("*Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*"), the fact that the crowd has already been fed with miraculous bread underscores the irony of their demand.

Jesus responds to their demands by picking up on this reference to the manna in the wilderness, explicitly linking the feeding miracle with the story from Exodus even as he contrasts the two accounts:

1. The donor of the bread of which Jesus speaks is God, not Moses: *“Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you this bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.”* – 6:32.
2. The gift of bread occurs in the present (“gives”), not the past.
3. The bread of which Jesus speaks is the *true* bread from heaven.
4. Jesus tells the crowd that they, not their ancestors, are the recipients of the “true bread from heaven.”

Jesus answers the crowd’s demand for a sign by showing them that they have already received one. These contrasting gifts of manna and the “true bread” recall the contrasting gifts that John presents in the prologue to the Gospel: *“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* (1:17).

Jesus ends this announcement to the crowd with a description of the “bread of life” as that which “comes down from heaven” and “gives life to the world.” In 3:13, the language of descent from heaven describes the activity of the Son of Man: *“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”* In 5:21, Jesus is spoken of as the one who gives life: *“Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.”* In describing the “bread of God” in this context, John is allowing the reader to recognize that Jesus is the real subject of the conversation, not the feeding miracle alone.

Like the Samaritan woman (*“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”* – 4:15), the crowd understands one part of Jesus’ words – that the bread of which he speaks is better than the bread given to their ancestors – but does not grasp why it is better. The bread the crowd requested is already before them in the very person of whom they made the request:

- “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” – 6:35.

This is the first of Jesus’ “I am” statements in John, in which Jesus identifies himself with common symbols found in the ancient Middle East:

- “I am the light of the world” – 8:12.
- “I am the good shepherd.” – 10:7.
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” – 11:25.
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” – 14:6.
- “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” – 15:1,5.

Through these common symbols, Jesus declares that people’s religious needs and human longings are met in him. What people need for life (hunger and thirst) are available in Jesus. It is a food that is “imperishable” because it is from God, whose gifts are eternal:

- “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” – Isaiah 40:8.
- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” – 1 Peter 1:3-5.

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Throughout the Scriptures, God’s people are invited to feast upon the truly imperishable food that is the Word of God, that which will truly satisfy our hunger and thirst because it is not of human origin but comes to us from our eternal God:

- “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” – Psalm 119:103.
- “He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I will give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.” – Ezekiel 3:3.
- “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts.” – Jeremiah 15:16.
- “So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.” – Revelation 10:10.

The Fourth Gospel identifies Jesus as this Word of God that *“became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (1:14). For Luther, Christ is the sole content of all Scripture; the Bible can be the word of God only if its sole and entire content is Christ:

- “There is no doubt that all the Scripture points to Christ alone. Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what more will you find in them? All Scripture everywhere deals only with Christ.”

As the feeding of the multitude points to Christ as the one who is the true bread of life that is imperishable, so also does the bread and wine of Holy Communion point us to the one who invites us to this meal, in which we partake of *“the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”* (Small Catechism). As we partake of this Holy Supper, we are reminded that what is central in this meal is the Word that blesses us with the eternal, imperishable promises that are ours in the real presence of our Saviour:

- “In the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed, God’s Word is the chief thing. Therefore, do not look only upon the water, the bread and wine, but rather connect them with the words, “Take, eat”; “Do this in remembrance of me,” and “Drink of it, all of you.” Learn these words; in them the sacrament is summed up...” – *Sermons on the Catechism*.

Even as we seek new methods for keeping the food that we set upon our tables “nonperishable,” we come to the Lord’s Table seeking that food which is “imperishable,” the meals that assures us of God’s steadfast presence with us now even as it gives us a “foretaste of the feast to come” where God will feed us with that which will never perish at his eternal table of presence:

- “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” – Isaiah 25:6-9.

We may be able to keep canned goods on our pantry shelves for several months. We may have freezers filled with food that we may not eat for several weeks, and cold cellars filled with canned goods that we will eat in the midst of winter when their season has long passed. We may even try to get over our aversion for storing “long life” milk outside of the refrigerator. But even the best “nonperishable” food will one day expire, because every aspect of human life is by definition limited. But that which is truly “imperishable,” that which will never fade or expire, that which *“neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal”* (Matthew 6:20) is the gift of the imperishable bread that is ours in the present of our Lord whose gifts are always “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” because they come to us through the one who is eternal, whose promises are everlasting, the Lord to whom we make a “joyful noise” because *“the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”* (Psalm 100:5).

Amen.