

Still Hungry?
January 3, 2010
Colossians 1:17-19 / John 6:24-35, 41-42
Dr. Greg Smith

Colossians 1:17-19 (NRSV)

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

John 6:34-35, 41-42 (NRSV)

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "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." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven'?"

Christmas is a time when we sing familiar carols. We sing songs that we have sung all of our life often without really grasping what the words mean. Fifteen years ago when Mark Hall, a youth pastor and lead vocalist of Casting Crowns, set out to create a new arrangement for *O Little Town of Bethlehem* he finally began to realize what the song was all about. Once he understood the lyrics, he was inspired to write a new song.

Listen to some of the words from *While You Were Sleeping*:

Oh little town of Bethlehem
Looks like another silent night
Above your deep and dreamless sleep
A giant star lights up the sky
And while you're lying in the dark
There shines an everlasting light
For the King has left His throne
And is sleeping in a manger tonight

Oh Bethlehem, what you have missed while you were sleeping
For God became a man
And stepped into your world today
Oh Bethlehem, you will go down in history
As a city with no room for its King
While you were sleeping
While you were sleeping

Then, in the final verse of the song, he asks the question
"what will we miss while we are sleeping?"

The Christmas story is so familiar to most of us that sometimes it is hard to stay focused and grasp the wonder of it all.

We would all be enriched to hear the story again and to really listen as if for the first time. We need to hear the accounts of Matthew and Luke, which tell of shepherds and angels, of journeys and genealogies, of the miraculous conception and the manger birth of Christ the Lord. We also need to hear the poetic and philosophical story of the word becoming flesh in John's gospel.

This morning, we need to wake up to the richness of the Christmas story through an encounter with the Incarnate Christ.

In our Gospel lesson, we are introduced to the crowd and their struggle to find their way to belief as they observe and engage Jesus. As we watch that scene unfold we realize that not all who are present will become Christ- followers. In fact, the barriers to belief for the crowd are remarkably similar to the barriers people construct today.

Some in the crowd are not ready to believe because they have UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.

They have been watching Jesus for awhile now and trying to decide who he really is. Just a day ago they were among the 5,000 that Jesus fed with just five loaves and two fish. Then they were a part of the group who sought to make Jesus king only to watch him flee into the mountains and his disciples disappear by boat.

Now they resume their quest for answers by traveling by boat to find out what is really happening. When they arrive Jesus is already there. Knowing he didn't go over on the boat with his disciples AND that there was no other boat available AND that he just performed an amazing miracle, what would you want to ask him?

I would ask "HOW did you get here?" but they ask "WHEN did you get here?" Their question is the first thing that came to mind, but not one that will reveal his miraculous water walking ways that enabled him to get part way there without a boat.

Their question is never answered directly. Instead Jesus moves beyond the question and addresses their motive with a blunt response.

"You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs - and for free"
(John 6:26, The Message).

Then and now, people stand in the crowd and want answers.

How did Jesus get here?
Can Jesus satisfy my greatest hunger?
What's in it for me if I would choose to follow Jesus?

Whatever your question, ask it. Don't let the crowd deter you.

After all, it is the crowd who demands a sign. Their DESIRE FOR PROOF is another barrier to belief.

They return with another question, "What must we do?" to which he responds "Believe in me and that I am sent by God."

The crowd hasn't seen enough to be convinced and instead follows up with yet another request. Prove it. Give us another sign.

In effect, they say, "Jesus, we are entitled to more than just a free lunch. Surely you remember Moses. He was from God and he gave bread not once but every day for years and years."

Jesus won't budge on his request that they process what they have already seen and believe.

Today, people in the crowd still want proof. They claim they will believe if only there is a sign.

They say, "The non-biblical literary and historical mentions of Jesus are too limited and don't focus on his divinity. I could possibly believe if some other ancient mentions were discovered."

They say, "By means of philosophically sound arguments, I can be convinced in the existence of God, but I cannot be moved from deism to Christ-following without an equally convincing proof."

They say, "If some people received manna and others bread and fish, then I deserve the same chance to touch and taste before I can believe."

Whatever your desire for verification may be, realize that Jesus has already shown who he is and awaits your decision to believe.

It just may be that your quest for verifiable evidence is a part of a bigger issue that you share with the crowd.

Their PRECONCEIVED IDEAS are a barrier to belief.

The crowd has seen and nearly believed, but can't get over an important problem: this Jesus is just Jesus. He is the son of Mary and Joseph. He cannot possibly be sent from God.

Today's crowd has preconceived ideas that make following seem improbable at best or impossible at worst.

They ask, "If Jesus is God why does the Bible give us a family tree? Why can't Matthew and Luke even agree on what it looks like?"

They say, "I know plenty of people who go to church and call themselves by Christ's name. If Jesus is just as hypocritical and irrelevant as they are, then I have no need for him."

Their experiences of individualism, consumerism, postmodernism and the other prevalent isms of our day make the message that begins with a manger difficult to hear.

Rather than seeking to fully understand Jesus OR
trying to verify his divinity OR
making him fit within our worldview
We must believe he is who he claims to be.

Today his claim is as bold as it is simple: I am the Bread of Life.

Listen to his claim again, but do so with the recognition that we are a hungry people with big appetites. Appetites
For healthy bodies and sound minds
For recognition and social status
For being right and getting our way

For technology that is smaller and faster
For instant gratification and satisfaction

Yet, despite our personal prosperity, our hungers are never satisfied.
The more we taste, the hungrier we become.

Jesus sees us as we truly are and reminds us again and again of who he is: The Bread of Life.

Those who are outside of the faith, those standing in the crowd watching are often characterized as spiritual, not religious. *They won't participate in the institutional church, but they willingly dabble in eclectic spiritual practices and openly hunger for a genuine encounter with the divine.*

The message for the crowd and for our congregation is clear.

Together, let us all hear it anew: just as manna "what is it" came down from heaven to satisfy physical hunger so now the Savior has come down from heaven to satisfy our spiritual hunger once and for all.

When we truly listen to and actually hear the words of the final verse of the familiar carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, we begin to make ready:

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

On this the second Sunday of Christmas, Christ asks us to respond with belief. . . . Do we believe in Jesus?

Do we believe - as Paul writes: (Colossians 1:17-19, NRSV)
He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He

is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell?

Do we believe – in the words of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
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;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human?

Do we believe - as A Brief Statement of Faith, our latest addition to the Book of Confessions, succinctly states:

We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God?

Do we believe all of these statements about Jesus?

Do we believe Jesus' own words as well?

Yes, we believe.

We believe and we trust that this baby born in the house of bread, in Bethlehem of Judea, is the Bread of Life.

As we prepare to come to the table, we do so hearing, trusting and believing Christ's words: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35, NRSV) Amen.