

Sermon: August 8, 2021 – John 6: 35, 41-51

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Watch at <https://youtu.be/nSTiCy5ii08>

“I am the bread of life” says Jesus. “Whoever comes to me shall neither hunger nor thirst” And the crowd says, “yes, Lord Jesus, fill us with your love.”

Oh, that’s not how it goes? I’m sure that’s what they would have said. Well how about, “I am the bread of life” says Jesus. “Whoever comes to me shall neither hunger nor thirst” And the crowd says, “yes, Jesus, give us this sustenance, that we might share it with others.”

Still not right? Perhaps I should look it up, then.

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 Judaeans began to complain about him, [saying] "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say [these things]?" (John 6: 35, 41-42)

A little bit of background – and then a lot more background - will help us to understand this actual response, in comparison with the more fanciful responses I imagined earlier.

The gospel of John sets this exchange right after the feeding of the multitude - that event where Jesus was preaching, and the people kept coming, and when it was time to feed them all a small quantity of loaves and fishes was transformed into food for all, with left overs aplenty. Regardless of whether you interpret that miraculously or allegorically, it signifies a key point, fairly early in Jesus’ ministry, in which he had something they wanted.

So the people come to him, seeking more of this nourishment – bread for their bellies, comfort for their souls, whatever is on offer. And Jesus pushes the discussion to a whole new level.

At which point we move into the bigger Biblical context.

As soon as Jesus says “I am...” we know that we’ve crossed the line, from simply talking about the words and actions spoken and encouraged by Jesus, into a discussion of the identity of Jesus. In the third chapter of Exodus, we recall a key encounter in which Moses is confronted by the Holy One through a burning bush, and the exchange went like this:

“Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ [God] said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’”

“But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to

them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ [And God] said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3: 7-14)

Throughout this passage, the God who identifies self as “I AM” – or in some translations, “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE” - tells Moses that the sufferings of the people are not invisible. This God who exists and who has agency, not only sees their troubles, but is moved to action. God’s relationship with them is not bland or non-specific; something needs doing and God is directing their deliverance. Furthermore, God acknowledges Moses’ fear of inadequacy, assuring Moses that God does not intend that Moses do this on his own. That’s not how the I AM works. Moses will be given the words and the courage and God will be there each step of the way.

So when Jesus says, “I AM” – in this case, “I am the bread of life” – his audience would not only hear this as a curiously boastful statement, but as an outright blasphemous one. Nobody gets to make this kind of I AM claim except the I AM. But throughout the gospel of John, Jesus keeps pushing the point, making a number of these I AM statements so that we have no choice but to notice the God connection. A friend in Arizona, Pastor and Bible Scholar Brian Stoffregen, outlines the “I AM” sayings in John’s gospel like so:

- 6:35, 41 I am the bread of life.
- 6:51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
- 8:12; 9:5 I am the light of the world.
- 10:7, 9 I am the gate for the sheep.
- 10:11, 14 I am the good shepherd.
- 11:25-26 I am the resurrection and the life.
- 14:6 I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
- 15:1, 5 I am the true vine.

I never know in a case like this, if these were points being made by Jesus to his audience of Jewish disciples, or by the author of John’s gospel to his early-Christian audience several generations later; perhaps it was both. In any case, there is clear intent here to connect the person and program of Jesus, intimately and completely, to the being and intention of God. What Jesus says, express the very heart of God’s love for the world. Who Jesus is, embodies the same passionate intensity for the real-life sufferings of the people, as the I AM who told Moses that the sufferings of the Hebrew people had not gone unnoticed. And in the same way that God-the-I-AM assured Moses that he would not have to face Pharaoh and lead the people to freedom all on his own, Jesus, in this existential list of “I AM-ness”, assures those who want him to give them something that his goal is much greater than this. Jesus promises that he will be present to them in their common quest for liberating love, all the way through crucifixion to resurrection. The one who uses the claims of “I AM” is also, “ALL IN”.

And for me today? What difference do these challenging and reassuring words from John make as my day unfolds? To get the answer to that question, I invite you to quiet yourself for a few moments, and go deep, and ask these four questions:

What do I need most of all, right now, in my life?

What is my greatest worry for the world, right now?

What injustices are most evident to me, that need complex intervention?

And: Do I feel any connection between these needs, and the ever-present, ever-living God? (or... How would I invite God into addressing these needs?)

By introducing the theme of “I AM” into this discussion, Jesus and the gospel of John invite us to intermingle our understandings of Jesus who walked the shores of Galilee, and God who accompanied the Israelites to freedom, and the risen Christ who promises to be present to our heartaches, personal and societal and global. We are invited to regard God-in-Christ, not only as some distant, pleasant entity, but as an active presence who engages the intensity of now and the uncertainty of future. We are reassured that our reliance on the Divine is not fabricated, imaginary, wishful, but is founded in the bedrock of existence itself.

When Jesus makes these somewhat audacious claims – to be bread and light, the vine and the shepherd and the gate, the way and the truth and the resurrection and the life - God’s own voice comes to us, acknowledging that what we need is not going to be just one general thing, and offering to be our companion as we engage whatever the needs are within us and around us. In our scattered life now, and in our gradual steps toward being a gathered community of faith in coming weeks, we together turn to that same God seeking direction and encouragement as we tiptoe our way toward whatever comes next. In all of these things, as individuals, as Church, as a community and a society, we are offered wisdom, resolve, and presence as we face the issues of the day.

We are. God is. Christ, the bread of heaven, Christ, who satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst, brings us together, dynamically, for fullness of life. Alleluia, and Amen.

Reference cited: Stoffregen, Brian. Gospel Notes: Proper 14B, John 6.
<https://mailchi.mp/c61aad8873e2/gospel-notes-john-635-51?e=ac0c055952>

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