***“Give Us This Bread”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 1, 2021

[**Exodus 16:9–15**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” 10And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 12 “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

[**John 6:28–35**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

28 The crowd said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” 29Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” 30So 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? 31Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32Then 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. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

35 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.”

We usually have many choices for our meals, but the ancient Israelites during the Exodus found themselves with very few choices. They had survived the initial rush from Egypt and now were struggling for survival. Some days they did not know from where their next meal was coming. Jesus’ audience is steeped in Scripture, and they accept the miraculous manna story at face value. Thus, they recall the manna story to Jesus, and they understand him to be making a miraculous promise when he speaks of bread from heaven. But Jesus’ message here is spiritual, rather than actually magical. The bread that he promises them is a real spiritual circuit that he would bestow upon the human race after his ascension to heaven—a spiritual connection direct to God and to himself.

Stated otherwise, what he is promising is an actual personal relationship with himself, our creative parent. He himself will nurture us spiritually, will satisfy our spiritual hunger. He gives life to the world. And the Father is the original giver. “It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32), he says. This may mean that the Father is involved, along with him, in the bestowing of the Spirit of Truth, the spirit that was poured out on Pentecost.

People have often wondered about the manna. Was it a miraculous gift, or was it a food that can actually be found in the desert? It turns out there are two plants, one called Rimth, the other tamarisk, that grow in the desert. These plants are fed upon by insects who then secrete a liquid that is full of sugar. These secretions harden to form white granules. People still eat these sweet granules today. The Persians call it “wet honey” (<https://momentmag.com/manna-is-real-and-not-so-heavenly/>). In any case, the fleeing Israelites found a way to feed themselves even in the desert, and the experience became part of the story they told about the Exodus centuries later. In their collective memory, their deliverance from Egypt and subsequent survival were both miraculous.

As I say, our receiving the bread of heaven is not literally miraculous, though it *is* spiritual. It’s not material. We have a spiritual relationship with Jesus, and we have a spirit endowment that he gave us on Pentecost. You could say that the whole life of Jesus was miraculous. How does the divine Son become a human baby, and grow up just like all the rest of us? It is certainly a mystery, but one that was meant to be. We were meant to have a divine visitation, a supreme teacher, an unparalleled inspiration for us to live *our* lives with loyalty and love. Now it is *our* spiritual inheritance to know about Jesus’ life, and to celebrate each year the joyous story of his coming to earth, as well as the pouring out of the Spirit on Pentecost.

Maybe you have been rescued with a gift from heaven at a key moment of need in your life. Or maybe you reached out and accepted a gift that was offered to you at just the time when you were ready. Was there a key moment that changed your life? A crucial decision on your part? A gift from God? Maybe a class or a Bible study you attended? Perhaps a pastor or a mentor had an influence on you? Give thanks for such an opportune experience. I was gifted with some wonderful Christian friends when I had my conversion experience. I quit smoking and I started writing spiritual songs on the guitar.

William Ellery Channing was gifted with the friendship of Rev. Dr. Charles Follen. Follen died when a steamboat caught fire and killed almost everyone on board in 1840. This leads Channing to an extended reflection on suffering, as well as on the man who suffered. He explores disease-induced suffering, mental suffering and heartbreak, and it leads him to say “Our most vehement emotions are those of sorrow,” and “every soul has its night as well as its day” (*Works*, 609). But suffering can lead some people to re-focus upon the “inward law on the heart,” and that our purpose is to “perfect the divine principles of our nature” (612). He observed that Dr. Follen had strong opinions, yet never passed the limits of courtesy or tried to suppress the views of others (615). He worked hard to lift up the downcast, to restore hope and dignity. He was a hero, but never thought of himself as such (615). Channing said that, after Follen passed, others found “springs of comfort, testimonies to religion . . . and pledges of immortality” in their remembrances of him (618).

Let me return to Jesus. I observe how often he put others at the center, whether ministering to the short man who had to climb a tree to see him, or to the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him through a roof, or to the unmarried woman at the well who found encouragement and strength in his words. He paid attention to others and gave them a word of comfort and inspiration.

What I want to say about Jesus is that his visitation was no accident. It was God’s will that we be provided with this bread from heaven. We are to study his incomparable life, and learn about God from him. He is the bread that feeds our souls, just as physical bread feeds our bodies. As he says later in this chapter of John, “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day” (6:40).

These words are comfort in our daily lives today, and will guide us in days to come, through joy and heartbreak. Jesus walks along with us at our side. We only need to ask for his words of comfort and courage to give us strength. We will overcome our dark days and thrill to share our joy and love. Our story with Jesus is being written right now. Give us this bread.