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*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not."*

*Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "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.'"*

*In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When 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."*

*-Exodus 16:2-4,9-15*

*The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand 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."*

*-John 6:24-35*

As Mother Mary Ann mentioned a couple of Sundays ago, we are in a series of lessons about bread. Even today, three out of our four readings speak about bread. We have the manna in Exodus, a reminder of the manna is the psalm, and then the manna is evoked once again in the gospel before Jesus talks about being the “bread of life”.

As a self-proclaimed carb-monster, I second that bread plays an ever critical part in the sustaining of our human form. However, the importance of bread cannot be overstated in this ancient context. At this time, bread and water were considered \*THE two elements\* for physical sustenance. They were a common thread throughout ancient society considered essential for survival.

In our Old Testament reading, the Israelites hadn't been on their exodus journey long before they started to grow hungry. When Moses and Aaron said to leave Egypt, they packed up what they could and left so quickly they didn't even take the time for their bread to rise. Now, the food had run out and they were hungry, and they were thirsty, and they were tired, and they started to complain to Moses and Aaron- “Why did you bring us out here to starve to death?” Life wasn't great back in Egypt, but at least they weren't starving in the middle of the desert.

God hears them and is sympathetic to their pain, so he gives them manna. When that isn't enough, he sends quail. His only instruction is that they only take what they need for the day, no more, no less. The text says he wanted to “test them, whether they will follow [his] instruction or not.” When they didn't, (surprise!) I can imagine God throwing up His hands in a sort of “Come on, guys...” sort of manner. But even still, God fed them.

Reading this passage, I can't help but to think about leaving this week. As most of you know, I will leave this Thursday to begin my studies at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. For the next three years, I will live apart from the rest of my family. My husband and daughter will remain here, while we each travel back and forth as much as we are able. The friends we have made over the last few years will be here, my parents and son back in Georgia. And though I am poised for this adventure, waiting anxiously for it to begin, it still feels a little...scary.

There are a lot of unknowns, a lot of pressures naturally built into a change like this. Not only will I be separated from my friends and family, but we will be supporting two households 700 miles apart. I am going into a graduate level program without an undergrad to prepare me. I came to the Episcopal church only a few years ago, so I am still learning concepts and vocabulary others have uttered since they were in the cradle. I worry how this choice will affect not only my individual life, but the lives of those closest to me. I worry about my relationships, my mental health, my role in this community of Los Alamos, and a hundred other things. Sometimes, it feels like a lot.

For the last several months, I have been driving down once a month to Albuquerque for a mission called Church Unbound. This outreach, started by Rev. Chloe Chavez, sets up at the Albuquerque Inn, across from the corner of Central and Charleston. In the parking lot, they hand out sandwiches and water, sometimes coffee or cider if it's cold, popsicles if it's hot. They have some clothing items available, dog food, and occasionally a few hygiene items. At two o'clock, they pack up everything and offer a short 20 minute Eucharist service for anyone who wants to stay. There is no pressure to remain for the service- only an invitation. Most of the people who are served at this outreach are experiencing homelessness or some variation of housing insecurity. Some sleep in tents on the side streets, or in their car, or simply wherever they can lie down. This past week I drove past someone

lying alone beneath a tree and was compelled to stop to make sure they were still alive. (They were.) Sometimes I see the same faces, and other times I see a completely new set of people, wondering what happened to the ones I saw the week before. I wonder if they have family who are thinking of them, who want to contact them but can't find them, or if they are all alone. Some people will tell you their story, others just want to eat in peace.

In the gospel reading, the crowd of people who had been listening to Jesus speak, once again found him in Capernaum. They ask what signs Jesus will give them so they might believe Him to be the one they were waiting for. Despite the signs and wonders they had already seen, they reminded Jesus that even their ancestors were given bread from heaven as a sign that God was the one true God. So, "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... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

When I read what Jesus says to the people about being the bread of life, I wonder what it feels like to someone who is starving to hear that- "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Now, of course, Jesus was not speaking only about physical food and drink, but for someone who may have gone more than a couple of days without eating, weeks without a bath or a bed or feeling safe in their environment, what does that feel like to be told "Jesus is the bread of life. You just have to believe in Him."

I think about this a lot. I grew up privileged. Each one of my three parents worked hard and I never had to know what it was like to go without *anything*, much less something as basic as food and shelter. Any time I slept outside of my own bed was, almost exclusively, by choice. I put myself in many, many dangerous situations that thankfully turned out fine, but it was rarely because of circumstances beyond my control. What I am saying is I have zero indicator what it feels like to not know where my next meal will come from. I have absolutely no clue what it feels like to suffer from a lack of basic necessities such as some of the people I have met on the streets of Albuquerque or even here in this community [of Los Alamos]. So I am genuinely curious, how does it feel to be looked in the eye and told that Jesus is the bread of life? That if you only believe in Him, you will never be hungry, and never be thirsty.

During our Bible study this past Thursday, we were discussing this passage and we came to a few slightly different conclusions about what this passage meant for believers. For instance, one meaning was that in taking up a life as a follower of Jesus, we are taking on a responsibility to take care of others who are hungry. Just as when Jesus thanked God and blessed the loaves and fishes, and the thousands were fed, so too are we called to feed those in need by the example of Jesus.

When I put forward another possibility, I was a little surprised to discover, no one else could relate. I described times in my life when I have gone through dry spells with God. Not necessarily that I abandoned God or faith, but that I simply got busy, and put my relationship with God on the back burner. I have gone through periods where I felt so disconnected from God; where I didn't pray or check in or put my focus anywhere near the presence of God for weeks on end. Most of the time, I wouldn't realize this had happened until I woke up one day and felt drained. Not even broken, or sad, or angry, or any emotion that took energy to maintain, but I would simply feel "without". Like I hadn't eaten or slept in days. Sometimes I would know immediately what I needed, but it was like

calling up an old friend after you forgot to call them on their birthday... and again on their anniversary... and again when you were supposed to follow through on plans you swore you wouldn't bail on, but ended up bailing on anyway at the last minute. It's just uncomfortable, and maybe a little awkward.

Sometimes I would get to this place of "without" because I was just busy going through life, not really paying attention to the things I knew I should be doing, such as eating more than once a day or getting regular sunlight. Other times, it was because I was in the midst of a dark night of the soul, and I couldn't bear to pray because I didn't understand what was happening and couldn't get past the pain of confronting it by way of talking about it. Other times still, I just didn't want to, so I didn't.

When Blaise Pascal said "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man, which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ" I think I can relate to that sentiment. If Jesus knew that we needed to fill this space within us, I imagine He would compare it to the one thing that is so critical to our very being in everyday life that we would understand we could not live without it. Jesus is reminded of the story of manna in the desert because like all good Jewish boys of the time, the story was a staple of their religious upbringing. The story was familiar, and the importance of the subject matter spanned across time and countless generations. In Exodus, when God heard his people suffering, even though they had and would continue to sin against him, he listened to them. Even as they complained about the bread not being enough, he gave them meat in the evenings to satisfy them further. When they took more than their day's worth, even against instruction, the leftover spoiled the next day, but their allotment was still given. This exercise was about creating trust. God wanted the Israelites to trust him to provide for them even when they couldn't understand or explain it. Jesus reminds the crowd that it wasn't Moses or Aaron who provided for the people, but it was God. Then when Jesus says, "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," I can't help but think He is not talking just about regular, physical needs being met. But taking into consideration the teachings of Jesus being centered around loving those around us and loving God more than anything, I believe what He was referring to is His exemplified way of living as what sustains us. Love sustains us.

I think that the bread of life we all so desperately seek is the love Jesus gives us, the love He shows us how to live. He is the bread of life because without this love, we are suffering, we are "without". Love is caring, compassion, and yes, feeding others who are hungry. This is the way of Jesus. It isn't any of my business why someone is hungry, it is only my responsibility to show them how Jesus is the bread of life, it isn't just an *idea*. When I am full in my spirit, because I have allowed God to fill me through regular communion with him, I am better equipped to serve others out in the world. I am stronger, patient, more understanding, and open to where I am led. When I am empty, I have nothing to give.

Through today's readings, we see an evolution of what it means to be in communion with God, I think. Trusting God by leaving circumstances that may be familiar, but are ultimately destroying us; trusting God to provide for our most basic needs, even when we grumble and complain; and following Jesus in the way He showed us to live. All three of these examples are seasons in our lives; times when we need physical nourishment, times when we need to let go and step out on faith, and times when we are seeking, or are in need of, spiritual nourishment. These seasons may overlap,

they may cycle through, but we each go through all of them, and whichever season you are in, I invite you to press into it. Recognize where you are and meet yourself there. If you are in survival or if you are in the midst of change, your needs are different than the one who is seeking something more. You have no other responsibility than to continue to survive. But if one is a believer, and their physical needs are being met, and there is security in their life, their responsibility is greater. Because in feeding on Jesus in our hearts, by faith and with thanksgiving, we take up the burden of others. We are called to care for others in the same way we have been loved and cared for.

So this is how these words are “feeding” (pardon my pun) me right now-

I am reminding myself that because God called me to go to seminary, I will not be thrown into unknown places without so much as something to eat and drink. God will feed my relationships with my family, my friends, and my community. God will give me the capacity I need to keep up and move forward in this new level of schoolwork. God will go before me, and prepare me for what is ahead of me. My spirit will be filled with the new rhythm of my life, being rooted in the practices of prayer, study, and service, and through this practice, I believe that, being sustained by Jesus, who is the bread of life, I will be given strength to go out to love and serve God and one another.

If we are remembering that God took care of the Israelites by providing them with food they needed at the time they needed it, with no need to worry about the next day, then we can reasonably expect that so long as we continue to trust God, we will be given what we need. On the other side of that, since we, as believers, have Jesus within us, it is our responsibility to look upon others with the strength and compassion we have been given in Christ, to serve them as we are able. Amen.

Comments and respectful discourse are encouraged in the comments section. We all have opinions, so let's be kind, friends.