



BREAD OF LIFE

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL





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BREAD OF LIFE LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

When the world feels heavy—divided and uncertain—our hearts ache, minds seek peace, and souls hunger for hope. In these moments, while many search for a way forward, the bread of life reminds us of abundance. There is enough love, grace, and hope for all. A gift that Jesus gives freely so we may give to others.

As we journey through Lent, from the wilderness to the shorelines of Galilee, we will find the sacred in the ordinary—like bread, simple yet essential. *Bread of Life*, highlights how Jesus fed people—not just their bodies but their souls—with good news, redemption, and stories of God’s kin(g)dom. From wedding feasts to eating with tax collectors to feeding thousands, people left Jesus’ presence with full hearts and bellies.

This resource invites you to come, and nourish your soul with the bread of life.

Spend time each week reading the scripture and reflection. Ponder the provided questions or discuss them with someone in your home or your community.

We hope this resource will be a simple invitation into the Lenten season and help create a memorable and meaningful Lent and Easter.

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ASH WEDNESDAY

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

We were so hungry. We'd spent the day hiking a Colorado mountain trail, and, too early in the outing, tore through our stash of granola bars and apples. Those gorgeous but grueling miles took us longer than we'd anticipated, and it was after eight o'clock when we made it back into town. We found a pizza place with a neon "open" sign flashing and slumped into a booth.

After our waiter greeted us sympathetically, brought us glasses of water, and took our order, he left and returned again to the table with a couple of balls of pizza dough, handing one to each of my kids. It was going to take a little while, he explained, for our dinner to be ready. But he invited them to shape whatever they wanted to from the dough, and he would pass it on to the cook, who would toss it in the oven.

My kids had the best time with those dough balls. They stretched them long, scrunched them up again, rolled them around in their hands, tore them apart, and reassembled them. Working with the dough, they forgot how hungry they'd been when we entered the restaurant. The waiter came by a few times to check on them. Eventually, they handed their creations over to him: one had made a bear, and the other, a dinosaur. When he returned with the baked animals, my kids marveled. While we'd been waiting, those dough balls had been undergoing a transformation. Those squishy, pale creatures they'd handed over were returned to them a golden-brown color, with crispy crusts. They were, recognizably, a bear and a dinosaur. But they were also something new and wonderful. Eventually, after some agonizing, we ate them.

Our wait for dinner that night wasn't anything like Jesus' fast. We don't know exactly how long Jesus spent in the desert; we know our scripture uses the number forty to mean "a really, really long time." But I wonder what was happening for Jesus in that long, long time. Was he looking at the raw materials of his life, wondering what to make of them? Was he recalling the wisdom of his tradition, considering how it had shaped him? Was he remembering the stories of his celebrated birth, or the baptism he was barely dry from, and asking questions about what those moments meant for who he was called to be in the world? Was the wilderness Jesus journeyed through a geographical one, a psychological one, or both, or more? While he was waiting, what sort of transformation was happening in him?

Whatever it was, he drew strength from it. When we might expect him to be at his weakest, he found the resolve to hold his own against temptations at least I would have easily succumbed to. A long, long time without nourishment, and he says "no thanks" to bread? A long, long time on his own, and he denies calling up a community of angels to surround him? A long, long time displaced, with no person nearby to speak his name, and he passes on claiming the kingdoms of the world, hearing chants of "Je-sus!" from the worshipping throngs?

I wonder if, during his time in the wilderness, Jesus remembered those words from the creation story: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." I wonder if he felt connected to the elements, given over to them as he was. I wonder if those words—about where he, and all of us, come from; where he, and all of

us, ultimately end—echoed in his mind, in his heart, when the tempter was making him those promises of fullness, glory, and power.

Could those simple, dusty words about origin and return be more compelling to him than the tempter’s lavish promises? Could what he and God were shaping of his life, there in the wilderness, be what he needed even more than bread?

The season of Lent invites each of us into our own wilderness journey. We’re encouraged to say “no” to what tempts but does not nourish us, turning instead to the dust. We’re invited to trust God meets us there, in the ordinary, daily bread of it all, and works alongside us to shape our lives.

As we enter the Lenten season on Ash Wednesday, take a moment to remember your hunger as a sign of your humanness. Feel it in your belly, and know its pang is a sensation you share with all people everywhere, even with Jesus. As you move through this season, let awareness of your own hunger draw you into deeper communion with others. Let it remind you of God’s presence and provision through any dusty place you may go.

ASH WEDNESDAY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions stir in you when you hear those traditional Ash Wednesday words: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return”?
2. What are some things—foods, activities, beliefs—that tempt, but do not nourish, you?
3. What sorts of wilderness have you experienced?
4. What has been sacred about your previous wilderness experiences? What has been difficult about them?
5. As you begin this Lenten journey, what are you hungry for?



LENT ONE

Scripture: John 6:25-40

BREAD OF LIFE

There is a lot to love about cross-country season. Both of my boys run with their high school team, the Grizzlies, and going to cheer them on at races reminds me of the Saturday mornings I spent running hilly paths through green and forested parks with my teammates years ago. Though there's new technology in timing chips and PRs are now posted online for team followers to access instantly, the most beautiful aspects of the sport remain unchanged. Crisp autumn mornings, with their yellow and orange leaves falling onto the dirt paths below. Applauding every runner through the last leg of the race, no matter how slowly they're making their way. Blankets to wrap up in on colder race days, at the ready once the runner crosses the finish line and their legs, no longer pumping, start shivering. And the very best part of the season, the tradition we all hope never dies: team dinners.

My kids' cross-country coach, like mine years ago, like countless others, embraces the idea that a well-fed team is a better-performing team, so before every race day, he invites the runners to a team dinner. Sometimes, these are held at the school. Sometimes, families open their homes to the team. While the high schoolers are running practice that day, some combination of their parents and supporters are preparing a feast for them. When their workout is completed, they rush in—exhausted from the miles logged but eager to fill their bellies. They are greeted with seemingly endless pots of spaghetti, a variety of sauces, leafy green salad piled high in bowls, garlic bread hot from the oven, and dessert options ranging from brownies to berries to banana splits.

It's incredible to watch how quickly the runners move through the line, how fast those mountains of food shrink, how crowded the kids make their plates, how quiet they suddenly become when they're all seated at the tables. After I'd doled out cups of lemonade at one team dinner this fall, I watched and wondered if all of these kids ate this well every night. I wondered if most nights, these kids all had a balanced meal, kind people to enjoy it with, and good conversation around the table. I wondered if most nights, each kid in that room got to eat with folks they knew would be cheering them on the next day, on whatever path they found themselves. I hoped so, even as I knew, statistically, it probably wasn't true. I was grateful that at these team dinners, each runner was well-fed, and more than that, each runner was welcomed, accepted, heard, served, celebrated, safe, and part of something bigger than themselves. All of that is as nourishing as the bottomless pasta bowls, if not more so.

When Jesus tells his friends and disciples he is the "bread of life," he's reminding them of all that people hunger for—not just the bread that fills their bellies but the belonging that eases their spirits, the care that heals their wounds, the love that makes them whole. The stories of Jesus' life tell us he broke bread with and for people. He listened to their deep hunger. Through his presence, he helped them know God's embrace of each of them, of all the world.

Through the sharing of broken bread, through the passing of one cup, a community that follows in Jesus' way also commits to addressing the hunger of its members, its neighbors, and the world. All of us are

running some kind of race. All of us need sustenance to make it through. All of us benefit when others are cheering us on. All of us benefit from doing the cheering, too—being reminded that no matter what it feels like, none of us travel these paths alone.

The Lenten season invites us to set aside surface desires and reflect on our deep longings. When Jesus promises those who come to him will never hunger, those who believe in him will never thirst, he is acknowledging that beneath all of our longings is the most vulnerable of desires: to be known and beloved by our Creator. Jesus tells us that longing has already been met. God’s knowing of us, God’s love for us, is like a team dinner. So many are so hungry, we might think there will never be enough, and yet everyone is welcomed, everyone is nourished, and somehow, everyone gets what they need.

LENT ONE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What questions, or what hopes, come to mind when you hear Jesus’ promise, “I am the bread of life”?
2. Who cheers for you? For whom do you cheer?
3. What is something “bigger than you” that you are part of?
4. Tell the story of a table gathering that fed you in more ways than one.
5. If you were to host a dinner where people left feeling full, known, and beloved, how would you do it? Who would you invite? What food would you serve? What questions would you ask? What stories would you share? Can you make it happen?

LENT TWO

Scripture: Luke 13:18-21

BREAD FOR GROWTH

New Testament scholar Bernard Brandon Scott tells us that a parable—a story like this one with a central, ordinary image illustrating a spiritual truth—is an invitation to re-imagine the world.¹ When we hear “the kin(g)dom of God is like,” we’re invited to re-imagine the world using the story or image that follows. So, imagine...a world where we are all beloved kin. God’s dream for us is coming true, like yeast a woman takes and hides in 60 pounds of flour, until it’s completely mixed in.

Much to my delight, my teenage son has taken up bread-making as a hobby. He didn’t inherit this culinary curiosity from me. I can make a great zucchini bread and a pretty good banana bread; I do well with all those breads that are *actually* cake. But until he started gaining an interest in exploring the worlds of sourdough and challah and dinner rolls, I’d never done anything with yeast. These days, once he finishes his homework, we’ve got an episode of *The Great British Baking Show* cued up, and we’re flipping through cookbooks for something with a rise time we can make work within our weekend schedules.

My son has an admirable, free-spirited, “how hard can it be?” attitude toward baking. I appreciate this about him, even as I cringe at the ingredients we waste when our recipe-less experiments end up inedible. But he’s got the basic idea in his head, so his real desire is to throw all the stuff together, play with it a bit, and see what happens.

It has been so fun to learn about baking alongside him. Watching yeast work its wonders is—after the eating, of course—the best part of bread-making. I know there’s science there, but it still sometimes strikes me as magic. Seeing the reaction with the warm water, the bubbling, the doubling once it’s folded into the flour, then the conversion of sugars into gases, never ceases to amaze me.

In the bread-making process, given the right time and care, yeast makes bread dough rise, establishing texture, creating strength, deepening flavor. It does the work love does in our communities. When we tend to our individual and communal relationships with time and care, we make space for them to grow, to take on their own unique character, to develop resiliency, to become meaningful and lasting. When we determine love as the ingredient we will weave in and through all our interactions, all our work, all our play, we make God’s kin(g)dom real right where we are. Here and now becomes the place and time where belovedness is celebrated.

The kin(g)dom of God is like the woman adding yeast, the enlivening agent that stretches and grows. It makes so much from the original offering that it becomes generous, abundant, and way more than enough.

Sixty pounds of flour is an outrageous amount to begin with. It’s the same amount named in the Hebrew Scriptures story where Abraham and Sarah welcome three strangers to their home. The amount of flour is memorable because it is so out of proportion to the size of the crowd coming to eat. Again, the mark of the divine—present in the parable about the kin(g)dom, present in the story of hospitality and visitation—is extravagant generosity.

Take the parable a bit farther. Add in some other characters. Imagine a hungry young girl seeing this woman kneading so much dough and asking what it could possibly be for. Imagine the woman replying, “It’s for anyone who’s hungry. Are you?” Imagine an older man walking by and the smell of baking bread finding him, luring him closer, until he asks the woman how much longer until it’s done. Imagine her telling him, “Sit right here. I’ll bring you the first loaf I take out of the oven.” Imagine other folks hearing of this woman’s generosity, and coming by. Imagine the folks who have already been given loaves tearing them into pieces, sharing them all around.

Imagine the community gathered around a common yearning, fed by a gracious Source, nourished so well they begin to discover their own generous impulses.

Imagine the bread, the love, never running out.

LENT TWO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you a recipe follower or an experimenter? What about your preferred method appeals to you?
2. If you were to write a recipe (or, if you’re more of an experimenter, some loose guidelines) for God’s kin(g)dom to grow, what ingredients would you include? What steps would you suggest?
3. When has someone been extraordinarily generous with you?
4. What is something—whether a tangible thing or an intangible quality—you have in abundance that you could give away as an act of love?
5. Can you tell a story about a time love helped you to grow?

LENT THREE

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

BREAD FOR EACH DAY

The congregation I am part of, like many congregations, appreciates both tradition and creativity. We believe in the importance of joining our voices together in prayer, and we know that asking everyone to say the same words is tricky. We don't all imagine God in the same ways, call God by the same names, or find comfort in the same ideas about God. One way we accommodate this diversity is by praying lots of different versions of the Lord's Prayer when we gather for worship.

Over the years and around the globe, many faithful folks have followed Jesus' instruction from Matthew 6 to "pray in this way" by drafting their own renditions of the praises and requests comprising Jesus' prayer. My congregation has twelve versions of this prayer which we rotate through, and I'm struck by the variety of ways these different versions express the line Jesus speaks as "Give us this day our daily bread."

A New Zealand Prayer Book probably offers the closest parallel to the scriptural request.

- With it, we pray, "With the bread we need for today, feed us."²

Some add to the ask for bread a word about our response to provision.

- With Bret Hesla we pray, "Give us what we need for each day, and help us to be satisfied with the miracle of that alone."³

Some make connections between bread and insight, highlighting the ties between our physical, communal, and spiritual well-being.

- With Mark Hathaway, we pray, "Endow us with the wisdom to produce and share what each being needs to grow and flourish."⁴
- With Jim Burklo we pray, "Give us what we need, day by day, to keep body and soul together, because clever as you have made us, we still owe our existence to you."⁵
- With Daniel Berrigan, we pray, "Your will be our will; You will that we be sisters and brothers and siblings, as bread is bread, water is itself, for our hunger, for quenching of thirst."⁶

Some extend the ask to include other people, and other basic needs beyond bread.

- With Parker Palmer, we pray, "Give us this day the bread we need; give it to those who have none."⁷
- With Sarah Dylan Breuer, we pray, "Give us what we need for today, and a hunger to see the whole world fed."⁸
- With the Central Congregational United Church of Christ in Atlanta, we pray, "Grant that all might have their daily needs met—that all might find gainful employment without discrimination; that all might have access to medical care without fear; that all might have their rights and lives protected, and find a loving community to belong to and call their own."⁹

And some make the ask more spiritual or more comprehensive.

- With the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, Kansas, we pray, “Give us today a nurturing spirit.”¹⁰
- With Dara Molloy, we pray, “May we trust that all our needs will be met.”¹¹
- With Steve Garnaas-Holmes, we pray, “Help us receive the grace of the present moment as you unfold it before us.”¹²

Each new rendering of the line invites us to consider: What is the most basic ask? What is it we really need, in the simplest of terms? And when we ask for it, what else is it connected to? Does a prayer for daily bread implicitly include a prayer for rain, sun, and verdant fields? For strong farmers and skilled bakers? For access to quality grocers and a role in a just economy? Even a simple ask like “daily bread” doesn’t exist in isolation, but is bound with factors including other people, known and unknown to us; systems that govern local and global happenings; our own bodies, and the body of the earth.

The Lenten season invites us to pay attention to the needs of our bodies and our spirits. However it is rendered, this line of the Lord’s Prayer reminds those who pray it that we do not meet our own needs in isolation—we are dependent on one another, on the bounty of the land, and on God’s provision for nourishment of all kinds. May we pray in ways that remind us of our connectedness to all that is, rooting us in gratitude for those connections.

LENT THREE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where does your bread come from? What do you know about the places and the people that produce it?
2. What would you name as your most basic need(s)?
3. Have you ever witnessed or been part of an effort to meet people’s daily needs—maybe a feeding ministry through your church or other community program? What do you remember about that?
4. Which of the versions of “Give us this day our daily bread” listed above are meaningful to you? Why?
5. Follow Jesus’ instruction to “pray in this way,” and compose your own version of the lines found in Matthew 6. What is the prayer your heart yearns to speak?

LENT FOUR

Scripture: Luke 14:7-14

BREAD FOR SHARING

We had everything set for our wedding banquet. Not assigned seats or a catered meal, nothing as fancy as that, but we'd assembled all of our favorite home cooks and bakers to make a fabulous brunch. Each of our moms would bring dozens of plump muffins. My brother would contribute fruit salad. Our friend Barb had promised her airy cheese gougères. Other friends spent the day before prepping beautiful vegetable trays.

The only thing we'd hired out was also our favorite idea for the reception: the omelet station. A chef from a restaurant we loved would invite people to choose their toppings, and he'd toss them with some eggs to make something personal, special. He had come out to the reception space a few days earlier and told us just how he'd need it, so we had everything set up for him to come and get to work. We knew our guests would be wowed by him. And we were hoping they'd feel like this was a bit of a treat, a thank you, especially since so many of them had contributed to the meal.

When we arrived at the reception hall, my brother caught me at the door and said, "I'm sure everything's fine, but...the chef isn't here." He suggested we announce everything that was already set up as "appetizers," letting folks know the line for their individualized main course would open momentarily. We did.

We called. No answer. We stalled. Still no chef. We'd been married all of twenty minutes, and here was our first test: how to move forward when our perfect plan crumbles in front of us.

Luckily, we didn't have to decide. One minute, we were starting to panic, and the next, we heard laughter and followed the pointed fingers to see our groomsmen, still in tuxes, taking their places behind the omelet station: one fiddling with the burner knobs, one starting to crack eggs, one calling out, letting people know the line could begin to form. None of them had restaurant experience, but all of them had made eggs before, and they pulled it off, charming the guests and churning out some tasty breakfast, too.

It's been nearly two decades, but I'll never forget the way those friends stepped in and saved the day. They'd come all dressed up, ready to sit at the head table, to make speeches, to pose for pictures. It strikes me they could have been characters in this parable from Jesus. When our situation changed—when we were on the verge of panic, tears, and humiliation—they let go of any attachment to their original roles and happily adapted to new ones behind the cook station in order to save our celebration. Their seats of honor sat empty while they stood to make food for our hungry guests. We could not have repaid them for that kindness.

The season of Lent invites us to the same kind of attentive activity. Lent is often thought of as a season to examine our hearts and lay down our unhealthy habits. Parables like this from Jesus' teaching invite us to more: they encourage us to examine our contexts, laying down our presumed privilege.

All these years, I've harbored a grudge against that no-show chef. I finally got a hold of him a few days after the reception, expecting a story about a flat tire, maybe, or a broken arm. But it wasn't anything so dramatic. He told me he'd just decided we weren't paying him enough to make the gig worth his while. All these years, I've thought, *He could've at least called.*

But what if it's not so simple? What if it really would've cost him more to cook at our event than he would've made doing it? He made himself vulnerable, sharing a glimpse of his financial situation with me. Is my grudge a defense mechanism against my ignorance of his reality?

Maybe our party-planning, our potluck-preparing, could include not just lists of supplies and lists of groceries, but also lists of questions, something like:

- Who might come, and why?
- Who might stay away, and why?
- How are we working to make this space/event/community a place where all feel welcomed and included?
- How does the design of this space/event/community account for various needs, abilities, circumstances, and identities?
- How does this space/event/community serve and celebrate each person?

Jesus told parables about meals because meals are microcosms of society. In these kin(g)dom-coming stories, questions about who is invited, who is welcome, and how they are received loom large. Original plans are scrapped in favor of less expected, more inclusive ways forward. Pretenses are dropped. Barriers are removed. Focus shifts from future honor to present openness. And when that happens, a fuller feast can finally be celebrated.

LENT FOUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What helps you feel welcome in a space, at an event, or with a community?
2. What roles—party planner, behind-the-scenes worker, guest of honor, emcee, clean-up crew—do you enjoy playing at communal events?
3. Imagine Jesus was a guest at your last party, potluck, or church event. What might he have noticed? What might he have wondered about? Who might he have sought out?
4. What are the risks involved in a wide-open invitation? What are the risks involved in limiting a welcome? What risk might you, or your faith community, take as you plan your next gathering?
5. Where, within your own context, is Lent inviting you to explore? What questions will you bring to that exploration?

LENT FIVE

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

BREAD FOR COMMUNITY

Two shelters operate in my town. One of them, running out of a church on First Street, is a low-barrier facility, meaning as long as people can be safe with themselves and others, they are welcome to stay. The other, a series of small buildings occupying a corner on Fourteenth Street, asks potential guests to first pass a drug test in order to receive a bed for the night.

Both shelters want to do good. Both think they're doing it right. Each has opinions about the ways the other operates.

Word on the street is: the Fourteenth Street shelter is too strict to be humane. Unreasonable expectations. A long list of folks who've violated some rule and won't ever be allowed back in. Guests aren't allowed to keep their belongings overnight, and staff members rifle through their bags and snatch stuff while they're sleeping.

Word on the street is: the First Street shelter is too lax to have any control. No expectations. There's no list of trespassed rule-breakers because there are no rules to violate. Guests are allowed to keep their belongings with them, and staff members ignore the banned substances stuffed in their bags.

Of course, both narratives are caricatures, each with a kernel of oversimplified truth. Still, the different operating styles and rumors about them caused those connected to each shelter to be wary of the other. Then, this winter, the growing population of houseless people caused volunteers and staff of both shelters to decide they should be working together. The folks from First Street called the meeting. The folks from Fourteenth Street offered to host and provide a meal.

A meal may be the best way to break through barriers and undo our assumptions about each other. In the story of Zacchaeus, even the promise of a meal opens a door to dismantle a community's prejudice.

Word on the street is: Zacchaeus is a bad guy. Not to be trusted. A tax collector, meaning he's a collaborator with Rome—the occupying force oppressing his people. And he's rich. Not just a tax collector, but the chief tax collector. He's made nice with his bosses and they've moved him up through the ranks. He is deeply embedded in the system of which all his neighbors are rightly suspicious. It's strange—his name means “pure, innocent”—but those who overhear Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus's house have a distinctly different opinion.

I wonder what informs their opinion, and what results from it. It might be tempting to think of Zacchaeus in the tree as a cute narrative detail, but what if it reveals something else? If he wouldn't have been able to see because of his stature, why wouldn't the crowd have let him come closer to the front? Saved him a space with a view? Could it be that Zacchaeus's position in the tree indicated not only his desire to see Jesus, but his community's disdain for him? Is he going out on a limb, hoping to finally be seen for who he really is?

Jesus calls out to him, and the crowd grumbles. Zacchaeus hurries out of his perch to stand up for himself. To tell Jesus they've got him all wrong. He gives back from what he gets—half of it! This isn't a repentant promise he makes after he dines with Jesus; this is his current practice. Here he goes an extra step, vowing that if he's made some inadvertent mistake in his calculations, he'll restore his unfair gain fourfold.

And the crowd gets to hear him make that promise. Because Jesus creates a scene of choosing Zacchaeus to dine with, he turns their attention to the famously little man, giving him the chance to tell the truth: Yes, he is caught up in an unjust system. And yes, he is doing his bit to resist it. Even before they sit down to feast, this interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus offers the crowd some new and nourishing hope.

It's the same thing the meal invitation did for the two sets of shelter staff. When word of the upcoming meeting got around, conversations shifted. Instead of following the typical script, folks started saying, "Yeah, we have different ways of operating, but I think we'll be able to work together," and, "We both want what's best for the unhoused people in our town, so I trust we'll find common ground." Over enchiladas in the Fourteenth Street space, folks listened and laughed, undid old assumptions, and forged new alliances. Meals can be transformative. Even the invitation to break bread together is a hint of the kin(g)dom, a reaching out that suggests the word on the street can be set aside for the truth at the table.

LENT FIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you identified with Zacchaeus, caught up in an unjust system? Or felt misunderstood and maligned?
2. When have you acted like part of the crowd, eager to call out injustice? Or joined in the accusations, even without all the information?
3. What story do you have of a meal—or even an invitation to a meal—where you were changed in some meaningful way?
4. Think of someone you don't know or understand well, maybe someone on a different side of an issue important to you. Why not invite them to share a meal with you—with no agenda beyond deeper understanding? What are the risks involved in doing so? What are the risks involved in not doing so?
5. As you continue on your Lenten journey, where are you finding nourishment?



HOLY WEEK

Scripture: John 12:12-16, Luke 19:28-40, Matthew 26:26-29, Luke 23:26-56

BREAD FOR THE ROAD

Several years ago, I moved from the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest and from one mainline Protestant tradition to another. The two traditions are very similar: both emphasize congregational leadership; both practice a sort of low-church liturgy; both believe everybody belongs at the communion table. The main difference between the two is the tradition I came from celebrates communion every Sunday when they gather for worship; the tradition I'm in now celebrates that ritual meal once a month. I had been in my new church home for only a few months when I expressed a longing for more frequent occasions for communion.

The woman I'd whined to was surprised. "Oh, but we do celebrate communion here every week!" she said. This woman had been at the church for decades, so at first, I thought maybe she was remembering a time in the congregation's history when the practice had been different. But then she elaborated. "Sometimes we celebrate with bread and grape juice in the sanctuary, during the service, and other times we celebrate with cookies and coffee in the fellowship hall, after the service." She paused and then added, "When we have potlucks, I'd call that communion, too, wouldn't you? We are always having communion here!"

I realized I wouldn't win this one. As much as I longed to hear the liturgy more often, to receive a tiny cup from a friend, or to witness the tearing of bread accompanied by words about how, like the bread, all of us are broken, all of us are blessed, I knew she was right. Whether it happens formally or informally, within the frame of quiet prayers and sacred songs or at a table where folks are all shouting to be heard, every time we nourish one another and remember our connectedness, we celebrate communion.

This expansive idea must be what Jesus had in mind when he told his friends and followers to remember him as they ate together. He needed to leave them with something. They could feel the tension rising. They could sense his demeanor changing.

Just days before his last meal with them, while the emperor paraded into the city showcasing all his weapons of war, Jesus came from the other side as a herald of peace. The spectacle in the center of the city was meant to awe its attendees into submission. Jesus' journey from the edges was meant to invite viewers into the movement.

But over the week, curiosity about the kin(g)dom Jesus came to share was silenced by whispered schemes and threats. And by its end, he would be put to death by the state—not as punishment for anything he had done, but out of fear for what he might do: mobilize the masses, inciting a rebellion that would overturn the injustice that ruled the day. He knew this would be his end. It's what had happened to all the prophets before him. And he knew his friends and followers would be shaken to the core by the way all they had come to trust, believe in, and hope for would be taken from them.

So he gave them this instruction as a gift: "Whenever you eat this bread, and drink this cup, remember me." This one who had called himself the bread of life now told them every time they gathered and offered

one another nourishment, he would be present. Whenever they called his name, they could count on him to show up. Maybe not quite like before—someone else would be blessing and breaking the bread; someone else would be pouring the wine, and passing it around—but the love they knew from him would continue to live on: in and among them.

And it did, so much so that these two thousand years later, we inherit this same tradition. The symbolic meal we share in our sanctuaries is simpler than the ones they would've eaten early on—those might more closely resemble our potlucks! But like Jesus' first friends, in small bites and at abundant feasts, we are nourished by bread and cup, song and story, memory and prayer, and one another. We feed and sustain each other.

As we enter the most difficult days in the Lenten season, and remember the violence that still moves in opposition to love and justice today, we draw strength from communion—the literal elements of it and the way those elements spiritually bind us to faithful friends from throughout history, all of us keeping a memory and movement alive.

HOLY WEEK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the celebration of communion like within your faith community?
2. Have you experienced communion outside of a worship setting? Tell that story.
3. How is food connected to memory for you?
4. Why might sharing a meal be considered an act of resistance? An act of faithfulness? An act of courage?
5. Is every shared meal communion? If yes, what makes it so? If no, why not?

EASTER

Scripture: John 20:11-18, 21:1-17

BREAD FOR FEASTING

In the wake of his crucifixion, Jesus' friends and followers were hungry. Maybe they weren't eating; have you ever been too upset to eat? But, they were hungry for understanding, justice, comfort, and hope.

They may have shared a meal together. Jewish tradition includes instructions for *seudat havraah*, the meal of condolence, to be prepared by neighbors and served to mourners soon after the death of a loved one. The meal, like Jesus' ministry, is about bread and so much more: it is a tangible way of nourishing those who may not have their own nourishment front of mind, or may even neglect care for their own bodies while they navigate their sorrow. The meal also serves as a formal—some argue Biblically-mandated—expression of consolation. While those closest to the deceased mourn, or even wonder about the use of going on without their beloved, their neighbors provide the needed sustenance, and the food they create to nourish the body also revives the soul. The menu for the meal of condolence includes: bread, eggs (for their symbolism of the continuous nature of life), cooked vegetables, lentils, and perhaps wine.¹³

Not long after the loss of their beloved friend, perhaps after sharing in a meal of condolence, the disciples head out on a boat. They are seeking solace in one another and in the familiar. They are hoping they'll catch some fish. Perhaps they find some solace. But, they don't find any fish, not until a stranger feeds them some helpful hints ("try tossing your net on the other side"). When they change their approach, suddenly, their net can hardly hold their catch. And the disciples are amazed to recognize Jesus as the one speaking to them from the shore. They rush to him only to find he's preparing a meal for them, turning fish over the fire, warming bread. He invites them to come and feast. Once again, Jesus—the bread of life—calls people in to feed the hunger of their stomachs, to meet the longings of their souls. As they're making their way to break bread with him one more time, he lets them know this time, it's a potluck.

They've just hauled in an abundance of fish. They've got more than enough to share. So, the resurrected Christ passes his work on to them. They've journeyed with him, learned from him, fed whole communities alongside him. And here, he makes a meal for them with food he has brought, and food that they have caught.

I get to hang out at church during the week, and sometimes, even when we haven't advertised a potluck, one just spontaneously occurs. Last Monday, a guy came in with a large hiking pack, sturdy frame, lots of pockets. He wanted to give it to the church. He thought there might be someone who could use it.

Sometimes, when it's quiet in the office, I'll hear someone playing the piano in the Gathering Room. Sometimes, it's a kid whose parent has come by to chat. More than once, it's been someone who said they came to church there years ago, played around on that piano then, and were just wandering back through, thinking they'd see if they could still pick out a song.

People who bought fabric for a quilt they've now decided they'll never make bring it to the church, knowing there are people there who will sew it up into something beautiful, then deliver it to someone needing comfort.

Whenever the church doors are open, people wander in with need, and people wander in with offerings. For every hungry person, there's someone who comes along with an unexpected abundance of fish.

Every time people gather in resurrection hope, it's a potluck. Everyone brings what they can. Sometimes we whip something up with ingredients we have on hand. Sometimes we make an extra effort to bring something special. Sometimes we sneak in and trust other people will have brought enough to cover us this time, because we just don't have anything left. And we promise another time, we will bring enough to cover for somebody else. We carry in backpacks and songs and fabric, hopes and sorrows and joys, prayers and care and questions, food for our bodies and nourishment for our souls. Gifts from everyone, for everyone.

After a dusty, maybe difficult, Lenten journey, along roads that have asked us to look closely at our own longing in all its forms, we arise into Easter this Sunday morning. Throughout this season, we have known hunger pangs, and we have been fed all along the way. At Easter, we experience resurrection joy as we gather around a table, a potluck piled high with bread and so much more

EASTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you imagine the characters in this story—Mary, Jesus, Peter, the other disciples—were feeling, thinking, and wondering about, as these events took place?
2. How have you cared for others following a loss? How have others cared for you?
3. What do you have to contribute to a potluck? What could you bring that would nourish others?
4. How might you encourage others to share their gifts?
5. After these Lenten and Easter explorations, what does it mean to you now to call Jesus the bread of life?

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