

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.4.24

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

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.

John 6:24-35

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. (584)

Aura is a concept Walter Benjamin developed. A German philosopher, Benjamin's seminal essay was "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which came to its final form in 1936. In it, Benjamin addressed his concern about the mind and imagination of "modern man," this new creature who was the product of some sudden and radical changes:

The industrial revolution had moved people's livelihoods from farms to factories, which moved people themselves from rural homesteads to cities, urbanization whose trends have slowed but continue to this day.

Technological innovation enabled for the reproducibility of objects and art which removed such things from the hands of their creators, artisans and craftspeople, put it all into the workings of manufacturers and their machines.

Objects would proliferate, down to this day.

Kitsch came to be, those things made for everyone, made by no one, having no moment of origin and no particular purpose or end. Really, they have no point at all: they are false signifiers of things that don't exist, or don't exist at least as represented. Those plastic flowers that are "too perfect"? Those paintings of cottages and brooks and little bridges that bear no sign of actual human presence, that are more rightly seen as pictures of sublime alienation?

For all this and more, Benjamin was concerned with the mind and imagination of modern man, that it had been dislocated and commodified, made literal and dumb to the subtle and suggestive and evocative, appreciative of things if aesthetically perfect nonetheless creatively dead.

Aura was a concept he developed to name what he thought was being lost, this which can even suffer decay. The aura of an object, the quality that gives it life or signifies life in its particularities and imperfections, it can suffer decay. The further removed it becomes from human touch or creative purpose, the more it becomes replicated, like a photocopy of a photocopy, the more it suffers decay. Eventually even the most evocative words become blurred and unintelligible on the page.

For what it's worth, "aura" is Latin for breeze or breath, breath of air. It's similar to *ruah*, which is Hebrew for the same, a word in the Bible, used to name God, the wind of God that in the beginning blew over the face of the darkened deep. *Ruah*, like YHWH, I Am, being, breath.

I think aura has something to do with the bread Jesus meant to offer the people, as opposed to the bread they'd come to him looking for.

We're still in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John; we'll be here for a while, five weeks, and all this time talk of bread. We're immediately following what we heard about last week, Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 people, feeding them to full on five loaves of bread and two fish, and then even having leftovers, twelve baskets full.

And now such a crowd was coming again, to have him do it again. They'd been searching for him. They couldn't find him. They thought he was over there. Then they'd heard he was

somewhere else. Finally, they found him on the other side of the sea. “Rabbi, when did you come here?” they asked. They wanted him to do it again. They were hungry again, and they wanted him to feed them again, just like he had before. Amazing! So cool!

It was a show. To them, it had been not a sign but a show, not a sign signifying something immediate and true, the presence of God, the abundant care and nurturance of God, but a show, a trick. “Do that again, Jesus!”

He called them on it: “You’re looking for me, not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” They’d been impressed by his ability to make food that fills them for a time; and, now hungry again, they figured he could do it again, him, Jesus, this enthralling person. They’d missed the more important point that it was food as a sign for what would fill them for eternity—the presence of God, something not reproducible, not a trick to do again and again, but something rather eternal, ever available for turning toward for a sustaining encounter.

In short, the impressive thing wasn’t the bread, not even the abounding bread, and certainly not Jesus as a person who could do such a cool trick. The impressive thing, the *essential* thing: it was the God who makes of such things living bread—which is likely why this reading is always coupled with one from Exodus, another time bread failed to be recognized for what it truly was: manna in the wilderness.

Funny thing, it was on this text that I preached the first sermon anyone ever walked out on. This woman, walking out: I imagine she was disappointed as the Israelites were disappointed when the bread they’d been promised would rain from the sky turned out to be “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.”

They’d been in the wilderness for a long time now, the Israelites had. They’d begun to voice their agony, their tortured wish to have stayed in Egypt where, though enslaved, at least they’d had enough food to eat. Those costly fleshpots—what they cost, surrendered freedom for at least enough food—sounded good to them now, now when their freedom was plentiful but little good it did them. They were hungry. Like people all over the world, like lots of people even today, right now, they were hungry for actual food. So, they lamented to Moses, and the Lord heard their cry and said to Moses that he should say to the people that the Lord had heard their cry and would rain bread from heaven on them, that they would each morning be able to gather enough to have for that day.

And so it happened: bread from heaven.

Sort of.

Wait, what is it? Which they would ask about what was *not* loaves of bread rained from the sky but was a fine, flaky substance webbed across the ground, fine as frost on the desert floor. “What is it?” they asked, which phrase, by the way, in Hebrew is *manna*.

Oh, you thought *manna* meant bread? No, sorry, it means “What is it?” As in, “This isn’t what we were expecting,” and also, “This looks a little gross.”

A secretion of bugs busy at night secreting, this is what in the morning those bugs will have left, which modern scholars suppose this sticky substance might have been: the secretion of night-bugs. Rich in carbohydrates, this secretion could get a person through. Plentiful across the desert floor at dawn, it could get a people through. But it disappeared with too much daylight, so eat it now, a present for the present, provision from the God whose providence never fails, it just doesn’t show up *literally* all the time. Sometimes it’s subtle, figurative. Sometimes it’s mere suggestion. But it will do. Trust me, or rather trust God.

The Israelites were disappointed, it seems to me: their expectations had been literal. The woman who walked out on my preaching was too, her expectation also of the literal. I think she wanted me to say loaves of bread had fallen from the sky, miraculous for their being so very out of context. But that’s not what happened. It was rather a fine, flaky substance, likely something of nature that also God made alive with promise.

Word was, in the weeks that followed, she was out telling people that new preacher in town wasn’t a real Christian.

The thing is, to see God’s sustenance in the ordinary fruits of the world, to see God’s providence in the commonplace, seems altogether akin to seeing God’s universal saving Son in a Jewish peasant from Palestine. A little disappointing, at first: not tough enough, not spectacular enough, not the warrior-king the people thought they needed, not the seeker of vengeance some among this occupied nation really wanted; but then utterly astonishing, astonishing for his not practicing violence as is done in the world but rather allowing himself to be subjected to the violence of the world which he then returned to the world as grace and peace, a transformation that actually does have the power to save.

A little disappointing, and then utterly astonishing: this is the very work of God in the world, that we believe in him whom God sent who, okay, doesn’t meet our expectation but provides for us what turns out we need.

“But do that bread thing again, Jesus. Just literal bread, please. We’re hungry.”

Jesus' defiance at doing so is really too bad, because food is what's needed when people go hungry. It's too bad because it's created Christianities that are entirely too spiritual. Many iterations of the church throughout its long history have made the mistake of insisting that this faith is concerned entirely with the spiritual, not at all with the material—which means Christians would be wrong to take seriously the material deprivation many people in the world suffer, too many people, far too many people. To suppose Christianity is a faith that would take no account of that would indeed shame any taking into account of that, which is a terrible mistake to make about so insistently incarnational a faith. This is a tradition deeply concerned with the body in the world and the body of the world. That the hungry should be provided food, that the vulnerable should be given shelter, that the sick should be given healing, that the dying should be offered mercy: these are imperatives at the heart of Christianity, and they have much to do with the body in the world, the body of the world, and our politics that organize for the purpose of gospel justice and happiness.

But bread is not merely for the feeding of the body, the sustaining of the body. There is something more of mystery about it—or there *can* be, indeed there should be.

The bread of life. This is what Jesus said of himself, “I am the bread of life.” And it's easy to hear this as him asserting something exclusive about himself—that he, Jesus, is the bread of life in a way that other people aren't or that other religious personas aren't. It's easy, by extension, to hear this as asserting something exclusive about Christianity—that here is a true religion in contrast to all those other religions that are false. But what he's saying here is something more subtle, more of mystery, less of personality. In Jesus saying, “I am...,” he isn't saying something about himself, he's saying something about God, God whose name is I Am.

This gospel narrative, John's gospel narrative, is full of “I am...” statements, Jesus saying “I am...” about all sorts of things: “I am the true vine,” “I am the living water,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” each of which isn't to be heard in reference to Jesus but in reference to God, this eternal, universal God in whom there is no death at all and made so present in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Spoken to Moses from the burning bush—the bush that burned though was never consumed, and as such is the very image of being, sustained being—there came the voice when Moses had asked, “What is your name? Whom shall I say sent me?” “I Am,” is what was uttered then, or sounded forth, “I Am” in English, translated of the Hebrew, YHWH, breath, the very sound of breath, the very sound of life.

So, when Jesus speaks of “I Am,” he is speaking of the very being so alive in himself, the life that truly is life and that fills him in his living. Call it YHWH. Call it *ruah*. Call it “aura” if you like, that mysterious presence that makes something come alive and which, when we encounter it, makes us also come more truly alive.

One day, a few years ago, I crossed paths with an artist whom I knew in Stockbridge. Outside the library there, I was sitting on a bench, and he happened along. He was in paint-spattered clothing, the only kind I think he had. He looked like he was floating as he moved toward me.

“What’s going on?” I can imagine asking.

He explained, he was just back from Italy. He’d just seen all these works of art in their original contexts. I mean, he’d spent his life studying these sorts of things. He knew the likes of them well. For the first time, though, he’d seen them not in art books or museums but in their original contexts, in churches and chapels, in villas and marketplaces, exactly where they’d been created centuries earlier, amidst the place for their creation and the people for whom they’d been made. You walk into a little by-way place, and you’re confronted with one of these, and it catches you off guard, like its minding you as much as you’re minding it, a mutual encounter but with an object as if it’s humming with life.

But how can this be?

The church has chased this mystery since its inception—the imperative to ritualize surprising encounter, to make regular the unnerving and reassuring the presence of God, unlikely yet reliable, entirely sustaining, enduring, abiding. But how do you that? Make regular what’s surprising?

Not knowing much about Catholic doctrine, I imagine this is what the doctrine of Transubstantiation is, the insistence that the host served at the sacrament is the literal body of Christ, the wine the literal blood of Christ. It has been transformed into an entirely new and different and more substantial substance.

The Protestants, us Protestants, with our tragic literalism, insisted upon the absurdity of that, a tortured logic demanded of the faithful. But then we ended up offering for our sacraments, at one UCC children’s program I heard of, jelly on toast; and it begs the question, has something been lost?

If so, I pray we find it here. The things made present in our gathering are nothing special except in our recasting them. The elements at our communion table are nothing special except as we pray they might be truly elemental, the barest stuff of life by which we might come more alive.

We suffer a loneliness like never before, the objects of our lives dead on arrival, whatever aura or ruah or spirit or life might have been communicated in the created things of human life and community all but gone. So far into this age of mechanical reproduction, we, many of us alive today, don't even know that it once was otherwise and might yet be otherwise.

So, please, trust me when in a few moments I tell you that this is the bread of life, that this is the cup of salvation. Trust, and it might come true.

Thanks be to God.