

August 1, 2021  
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35

Pentecost 10  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“What Is This?”**

*“When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was.”*

*“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*

Wisner Hall is a large multipurpose building at the center of my university campus, a building that includes classrooms, a large auditorium, and the campus dining hall that has been the target of the complaints of generations of Ursinus students. While I’m sure that the food was not as bad as I remember it to be, “Wisner food” was up there with complaints about professors and class requirements as the most frequent object of complaints on the campus. A particular source of consternation was when the dinner menu included what we called “mystery meat.” It might be identified as beef stew, or Hungarian goulash, or beef stroganoff; but to us, its was merely unidentified meat in some sort of brown source. Every time we saw it on the menu or on our plates in the cafeteria line, the reaction was the same: *“What is this?”*

When I graduated from university and entered the seminary; I made two discoveries: the food at the refectory at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia wasn’t much better than “Wisner food,” and my generation was not the first ones to complain about their food situation. In our Old Testament class, we studied the Exodus from Egypt and the situation of the people of Israel after they crossed through the sea to the Sinai wilderness. One would expect that this people, who had been freed from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, would be filled with praise and thanksgiving over their liberation through the mighty acts of God, who sent Moses to be the one who would lead them out of bondage and return them to the promised land. One would expect all these liberated people to join with Moses and Miriam in singing praises to God: *“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea”* (Exodus 15:1, 21). One would assume that the people of Israel would follow the words of our Communion service, that *“it is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that w should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God ...”*

But that is not what happens; the Sinai wilderness turns out to be a profoundly troubling place for Israel, where the necessities for survival are not immediately supplied. As they surveyed the barren landscape, *“the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness”* (Exodus 16:2). The crisis over the lack of food and water becomes a crisis of leadership, an assault upon the leadership of Moses and Aaron, who are accused of choosing trouble for Israel in place of bondage. They are so distressed over their current predicament that they engage in nostalgia for the “good old days” of bondage in Egypt: *“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”* (16:3). The people of Israel *“complain about the present reality of a troublesome liberation with a fictitious enslavement ... the community misremembers enslavement as a time when enslaved persons sat by fleshpots and ate their fill of bread”* (Stephen B. Reid). Forgetting the suffering they endured, the Israelites in their anxiety appear to be willing to trade liberation for a return to bondage.

The complaints of the people are not only heard by Moses and Aaron; the Lord takes over and addresses the complaint directly. God tells Moses that *“I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.”* (16:4). This “bread from heaven” will be given out of God’s rich storehouse, not Pharaoh’s. The purpose of this divine gift of bread will be to *“test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.”* God resolves to test Israel, to determine whether Israel is prepared to receive bread and life under wholly new terms and completely changed conditions. *“Israel will be under scrutiny to see if the old ways of receiving bread in Egypt (in anxiety, oppression, hoarding) can be resisted.”* (Walter Brueggemann).

As the complaints came from everyone, the instructions now go to everyone. Moses instructs his brother Aaron to *“say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’”* (16:9). The imperative to “draw near” is coupled with the accusation that God has heard the complaints of the whole congregation of Israel, and on the basis of being heard God will act on their behalf so that *“you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”* (16:12). God’s hearing of the complaints does not provoke divine anger (unlike in Numbers, where *“when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled.”* – Numbers 11:1); God promises to provide meat and bread so that Israel will know *“that the wilderness is not empty but is inhabited by the powerful presence of God.”* (Brueggemann).

God's promise is fulfilled when *"in the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp"* (16:13). When the dew is lifted, the Israelites discover a kind of bread they had never seen before: *"a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground"* (16:14). Their first reaction is one of confusion: *"When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was."* (16:15). The Hebrew that is translated "what is it" is *man hu*, giving it the name "manna." Moses responds to their bewilderment by proclaiming that *"it is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat,"* the bread that accentuates the power and generosity of God and the *"divine providence [that] recurs throughout the wilderness wandering stories."* (Reid).

- "The God of Israel is peculiarly present in wilderness circumstance in transformative ways. The narrative testimony of Israel responds to such acts and gifts with wonder and gratitude. In turn, these narrative testimonies evoke an authorize other petitions for like action from God in new circumstances of threat." – Brueggemann.

God's providential feeding of people in the wilderness was again experienced when Jesus fed the multitude so that all were satisfied, an experience that the crowd recognized as a "sign" that *"this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world"* (John 6:14). When Jesus realizes that they have not understood the meaning of this sign, *"he withdrew again to the mountain by himself"* (6:15), while the disciples went by boat across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. The crowd, however, proves to be persistent: *"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"* (6:24). Jesus does not answer the crowd's question as to *"when did you come here,"* but redirects the crowd's motive for seeking him: *"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves"* (6:26). Jesus uses the double amen "very truly, I tell you" four times in this chapter, a word of assurance that his message is guaranteed by God: *"Jesus is the Word of God; he is the Amen"* (Raymond Brown). This crowd can only respond to the feeding miracle in terms of their full stomachs; they do not see it as a sign that points beyond itself to the one who made it happen. Jesus contrasts the crowd's work for food that perishes with food that *"endures for eternal life"* (6:27), echoing the Word of God spoken through Isaiah:

- "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves with rich food." – Isaiah 55:2).

The food that endures for eternal life, much like the living water that Jesus promises to the Samaritan woman at the well (*“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”* – 4:14) comes from the Son of Man, the one on whom *“God the Father has set his seal,”* bestowing a formal mark of identification.

The people still do not understand the gift that Jesus is offering; in asking *“what must we do to perform the works of God?”* (6:28), they misinterpret the gift of imperishable food as something that must be earned. The crowd’s question implies a contingency: they will do God’s work only if Jesus does God’s work first and performs a sign. But in the Fourth Gospel, such misunderstandings frequently lead into some of the most memorable and beloved teachings of Jesus; *“many of us have come to love John’s Gospel precisely because we didn’t ‘get’ Jesus – and when we ‘get’ Jesus it was because Jesus got us!”* (Robert Hoch). Jesus attempts to return to his original use of “work” by defining it as faith in *“him whom God has sent”* (6:29). When the people again insist on a “sign” that will allow them to believe, referring to the gift of manna in the Sinai wilderness, Jesus reminds them that *“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”* (6:32). They are now the recipients of God’s gift of the “true bread from heaven,” the *“bread of God ... which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (6:33). This description shows that Jesus is the real subject, now the feeding miracle alone. The miracle is the sign that points to the one who fed the multitudes so that they may know that he is the *“Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth”* (1:14).

- “Although the crowds witnessed the healings and ate their fill, they did not recognize the miracles as signs. They did not see spiritually what the feeding miracle revealed about Jesus and his work.” – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

Like the Samaritan woman (*“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”* – 4:15), the crowd has understood one part of Jesus’ words – that the bread of which he speaks is better than the bread given to their ancestors – but does not grasp why it is better. The bread of which Jesus speaks is given once and for all in the very person of Jesus, who now clearly identifies himself when he says to them that *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”* (6:35). This is the first of Jesus’ “I am” (*ego eimi*) statements in John, the distinctive core of Jesus’ language of self-revelation in the Fourth Gospel. *“Through these common*

*symbols, Jesus declares that people's religious needs and human longings are met in him*" (Gail O'Day). What the people have demanded is already present in the person of Jesus, *"the living bread that came down from heaven"* (6:51).

Jesus' identification of himself as the bread from God develops biblical imagery for God's wisdom and law, which were likened to food and drink:

- "Whoever fears the Lord will do this, and whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom. She will come to meet him like a mother, and like a young bride she will welcome him. She will feed him with the bread of learning, and give him the water of wisdom to drink." – Sirach 15:1-3.

To feed on God's Wisdom and Torah means to take it in, to learn from it and allow it to transform one's life. As the bread of life, Jesus is God's Wisdom, who has come down from heaven and become flesh. Jesus will lead his followers to an altogether new level of meaning in which they are invited to feed on him as God's gift:

- "Jesus combines allusions to God's wisdom with Isaiah's prophecies of salvation and points to himself as the one who makes these prophetic promises a reality. When we come to, or believe in, Jesus, we recognize him as God's wisdom, as the one who teaches God's ways and in whom God fulfills his promises to save." – Martin and Wright.

The question of the Israelites that was also on the lips of the crowds who experienced the feeding miracle is the question Lutherans have been invited to ask for generations: *"What is this?"* In the *Small Catechism*, it is the question Martin Luther poses as he assists us in learning and teaching the chief parts of our Christian faith that we promise to teach our children at baptism: the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Our question "what does this mean?" (*"Was ist das?"*) becomes an opportunity for us to learn what it means to believe in *"God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth,"* the God to whom we pray to *"give us this day our daily bread,"* which Luther identifies as *"everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies"* that God provides *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all."* As we see the bread on our dinner tables as a sign of God's continuing presence and abundant blessings, we see the bread on the Communion table as a sign of the presence of the one who is the Bread of Life, through whose gift of his body and blood we have the assurance of our Lord's presence now as we also receive a *"foretaste of the feast to come"* (*Lutheran Book of Worship*):

- “What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for Christians to eat and to drink ... The words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin’ show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

The words that we hear in our Communion service remind us that we need to recognize the signs of God’s loving presence and abundant blessings in every aspect of our lives: *“It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ.”* As the people’s question about the bread of God became the means through which they identified the manna from heaven as *“the bread that the LORD has given you to eat,”* we are called to pause before every meal that is set before us so that we may recognize it as a sign of God’s abundant blessing present among us, and give thanks that God provides us food for our bodies as our Lord is given to us as the bread of life that will nourish and strengthen us unto eternal life. We may even take the words of my fellow university students to see that our question – *“What is this?”* – is answered as through the eyes of faith we proclaim that *“the eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.”* (Psalm 145:15-16).

- “A believing heart well perceives how our plowing and sowing would be lost unless God’s goodness were here at work. Even though we must do our work diligently and seek our food from the soil, we must in no way trust in our work as though our hands made the harvest. More is needed than our human hands. God’s blessing and mighty keeping are essential for growth.” – Luther.

I was not only pleased with what I discovered on my plate in Wismer Hall after I joined my fellow students in asking *“what is this?”* But it is a question that is most appropriate for us to ask as people of God, because it reminds us that the food that is before us is a blessing from God to strengthen our bodies and remind us of God’s steadfast presence. It is the question we ask as we come to the Lord’s Table, to receive the bread that is the Body of Christ given for us by the one who gave his body so that *“as we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6:5). It is the question that opens our eyes and minds to the goodness that is present among us in Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life that nourishes us unto eternal life. Far from indicating rudeness or a lack of respect, the question *“what is this?”* brings us into the presence of the Lord,

the one who is present among us, who provides for us, protects us, who is “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” who leads us all our days until he gathers us together into our eternal home.

Amen.