

Why is manna from heaven like horse hay? Both are from aloft. Ha ha ha. A cute way to start our day with this famous passage that most refer to as manna from heaven. But as they say, the devil is in the details, and the details of this story don't actually mention heaven. At least not in the sense of angels floating on clouds. It's better translated *the heavens*. It's the term we get in Genesis when we read that God created the heavens and the earth. So this special food came from on high, sent by God, but not necessarily from that idea of a wonderful place up above that we all go when we die, where angels live rent free.

This happens in the New Testament as well. Sometimes when we translate a Greek word for the heavens just to mean heaven, we easily make the mistake that we are referring to an eternal home in the clouds where we all play harps and get to play air hockey with Jimmy Hendrix. This may be a future reality, but it's not what scripture is talking about in many instances when we simply say heaven. Which challenges us to ask ourselves, is this future home where we live for eternity really what the Bible is describing and what does this mean for our faith practice, our belief system, our way of life to believe in one or the other?

Our gospel today is the continuation of the story of the feeding of the five thousand. It's in a section of John's gospel often referred to as the book of signs. Throughout, Jesus shows the people signs or we may say performs miracles like feeding five thousand with two barley loaves and dried fish, or walking on water. But the signs are never the point. Rather if we give each passage a careful look, it's important to listen to what Jesus is saying, and he typically complains about the signs. They are done to satisfy people who demand them so they might believe, but he is impatient with their lack of faith and disappointed in them for even wanting the sign in the first place. Much like how God provides manna for the Israelites to keep them from grumbling.

In today's gospel Jesus says quite plainly that they are following him just so he can keep giving them free food. But he uses the moment to teach them and they seem like they are willing to listen. So there is a back and forth and in the end Jesus explains that what they are looking for which will truly satisfy their souls can be found in him. He mentions bread which lasts for eternal life. Who wouldn't want that? Eat and never go hungry; eat and live forever! But just like the term we sometimes translate 'heaven' in the reading from Exodus today, we have to be careful with the translation of 'eternal life' here. It's the word in English for eon. An eon is an age. Jesus is talking about the bread of the new age – new age bread. What is this idea?

Remember that Jesus is Jewish. He is addressed here as rabbi. He and all the writers of the New Testament are considered ancient Jews. And the ancient Jews were creational monotheists. For them, God's great future purpose was not to rescue people out of the world, but to rescue the world itself, people included, from its present state of corruption and decay. We hear in Revelation that the Lamb upon the throne says: *behold I make all things new*, which is a reference to a passage in Isaiah. There is not a sense that we die in order to experience a kind of paradise but the world is renewed and no longer corrupted by sin. Jesus isn't asking us to find hope by waiting until we die to go to a far off place, rather to find hope in him who inaugurates a new era, a new eon, a new age. It's why we sometimes pray: *world without end...* And to experience this he invites those who follow him to have faith in him.

This term is also very important. It's a term which doesn't mean to follow a belief system or to say I choose Jesus over the alternatives. It is actually an active way of living which requires us to put our trust in Jesus Christ. Therefore, many Christians do not have faith in the way Jesus describes it in John's gospel today. We have faith in our investments, modern medicine, even the government more than we often do in Jesus Christ. Just look at the size and capacity of our military and it's plain to see we are very afraid of our neighbors and relying on our might rather than living by a set of principles which ask us to forgive, turn the other cheek, and love our neighbor enough to lay down our lives for their sake.

This is quite a challenging thing to say and to hear. And I wonder how this nation and our world would be different if we truly lived as though following the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ would bring us to a place of actually experiencing the new age that Jesus has ushered in. If we would experience what in other words might be described as heaven on earth.

For more clarification we might turn to our epistle today which asks the Christians in Ephesus to *lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* What a wonderful thing to wish for and encourage people to do. But again, it's helpful to stay on track and get all we can from this passage by being careful about the translation. Most English translations say: "life worthy of the calling." When we hear the word "worthy" it is not unusual for us to think in terms of "deserving," as if we are to live in such a way that we deserve to be called by God. The Greek word used in 4:1 is *axios*, an economically-based term describing how the two sides of a scale are to be in equilibrium. Therefore, the appeal here is for Christian living to be in equilibrium with God's call. Christians live out who God has already made them to be. Christian conduct not only flows out of the new reality created by God, Christian conduct puts into concrete action our new reality in Christ. Paul gets what we read in John's gospel. There is a new reality. Living into it looks like patience, love, unity in spirit. This is both the evidence of this new reality and the new reality itself. Who could ever need a bomb if people are living like this?

Scripture can be quite slippery. It doesn't really say just one thing about anything. If that were so, we would need only one gospel account and Paul wouldn't have written all those letters to new churches which we still need to read today because we still are working this all out even 2,000 years into the new age. But sometimes we pause to look carefully at passages which invite us to ponder the ways of God and the love of Jesus Christ in a particular light as we have this Sunday. A collection of passages which don't point to a far off heaven as we may teach children in Sunday school, but the hope of a new life here and now in Jesus Christ – Jesus the Messiah, who doesn't get us into heaven but helps us see the heaven that is all around us already, who doesn't save us from this world but saves us from the sin which infects this world, who invites us not to experience eternal life in the future, but limitless life right now *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Because if that doesn't sound like heaven on earth, I don't know what is.