

Like Peter Said

When we first encountered Solomon last week, he was newly crowned and anointed, a young king seeking to shore up his claim to power with a series of strategic executions and a diplomatic marriage. When Adonai appeared to him in a dream, Solomon shrewdly asked for wisdom to lead God's chosen people. Our delighted Lord promised to reward Solomon not only with wisdom, but with a lifetime of riches and honor for having made such an astute request. Today, we see the king in his apex moment. The magnificent Temple that Solomon has constructed for the Lord is complete, the Ark of the Covenant has been placed within it, and everyone who's anyone in Israel has assembled to watch their king stand at the altar and lead a prayer to Adonai. Solomon has established himself as the ultimate ruler, a mighty king secure in his earthly power and ablaze with divine blessing. He truly has it all.

Contrast Solomon's triumphant performance with Jesus's experience in this week's Gospel passage. Jesus has been teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, repeatedly referring to himself as the Bread of Life. When the religious leaders push back on the metaphor, Jesus insists that only those who eat his flesh and drink his blood can abide in him and gain eternal life. Not only are the synagogue leaders disgusted, Jesus's followers are troubled, too. Jesus knows that many of those who have been traveling with him are put off by what sounds like an invitation to participate in some kind of ritual cannibalism. In typical fashion, he doubles down. "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." Jesus is right, as always. Many of those who have been following him from town to town, listening to him preach and watching him heal the sick and cast out demons, are sickened and confused. They can't accept this

teaching, so they abandon him. Jesus turns to his original twelve disciples and asks, “Do you also wish to go away?” It’s a fair question, asked when it seems as though Jesus’s ministry might be on the brink of collapse. It’s entirely possible that one of the twelve – Judas, perhaps, maybe even Thomas or Matthew – is about to clear his throat and say, “you know, Rabbi, now that you mention it . . .,” triggering a mass exodus. But that doesn’t happen because, in this crucial moment, dear, plainspoken Peter says the exact right thing. “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” None of the twelve, not even Judas, is going to walk away from Jesus after that.

Several versions of this passage translate Jesus’s question in the negative – “you don’t want to leave too, do you?” Relying on that translation, some commentators argue that Jesus is confident that his twelve closest friends will stay with him. I wonder. Our lectionary omits the last two verses of this chapter, which read, “Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.’ He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.” The scholarly consensus around that loaded Greek word for devil, *diabolos* (διάβολος), is that Jesus calls Judas a false accuser, not the Adversary itself. Even if the scholars are right, Jesus sounds discouraged and a little sad to me. Tracking the passage of time in the Gospels can be tricky, but it appears to have been only a few days since Jesus had thousands of people eagerly following him over land and sea and hanging on his every word. Now, he’s down to a dozen. We shouldn’t overemphasize the importance of crowd size, but the twelve peasants standing awkwardly around Jesus in Capernaum’s modest synagogue are a far cry from the massive hosts of Israel who assembled to watch Solomon in all his gilt-edged grandeur, cutting the ribbon on the resplendent new Temple for which he repeatedly takes credit in his very public prayer to God.

The Reverends Eric C. Fistler and Robb McCoy raise the provocative question in their *Pulpit Fiction* podcast of what Solomon's Temple is for. Solomon knows that God's wild, wonderful Spirit can't be contained in a mere building, no matter how splendid. Solomon says he built the Temple as the place toward which the Hebrew people could pray and where foreigners could learn of Adonai's greatness. There's no reason to doubt him. Still, did the Temple really have to be quite so ostentatious? The Lord told David he was quite comfortable being worshipped in a tent. I suspect that Solomon's Temple was designed not only to honor the Lord, but to impress upon the world just how rich and powerful Solomon himself was. Kings tend to build monuments to their own glory, even when their stated intention is to glorify God.

Adonai undoubtedly appreciated the gesture. He covered Solomon with riches and honor, just as he promised. But his Son wasn't looking to be worshipped from a respectful distance in an elaborate, expensive building. Jesus was practically begging for relationships with his followers, seeking an abiding intimacy so deep that it could only be expressed through references to his body as food and his blood as drink. Although he was speaking metaphorically, Jesus was still asking his followers to trust him enough to let him fully into their hearts and their lives. I don't think anyone listening to Jesus that day thought he really meant to make himself the main dish at dinner. His followers knew that Jesus was inviting them into a profound relationship, and that's why they left. It wasn't his rhetoric that offended them, it was the level of intimacy that he wanted. Those who came for the food and stories and miracles weren't ready to make such an intense commitment, so they rejected his request and melted away. Only those who had come to know Jesus as the Holy One of God realized that there was no place better for them to go. Easier, perhaps, or less threatening to those hard little knots of ego that insist on being the centers of our lives, but not better. And God bless Peter for so clearly making that point.

John's Gospel confirms what we already know. As we go about our business of worshiping Jesus and helping the Holy Spirit bring the Kingdom into this world, some people are going to leave. Depending on the circumstances of our lives, any of us might drift away from the church for a while. The good news is that some of the people who deserted Jesus over the whole "eat my flesh, drink my blood" thing eventually came back, and were welcomed when they did. That tells me we should be similarly welcoming when our friends in Christ come back to us after a time away. The church remains the place where we commune with our Lord, inviting him to abide in us as we abide in him through the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. We'll do it a little differently today, partaking of home-baked bread instead of commercially processed wafers. There's nothing wrong with those, but it's good to remind ourselves once in a while of what Jesus was talking about when he called himself the Bread of Life. Real bread tastes good – it's a reminder that our relationship with Jesus isn't about dutifully complying with a list of hard, tasteless rules. Our relationship with Jesus is all about deepening love, and it should be delicious.

We've come to the end of the Bread of Life Discourse, David's family history and the letter to the Ephesians. Before we leave them, let's spend a few minutes on Ephesians' famous advice to arm ourselves against the Adversary's wiles by putting on the whole armor of God. In her sermon "The Truth Will Make Us Odd," the Reverend Doctor Amy Richter points out that we are not to meet those who are spoiling for a fight by matching anger with anger and violence blow for blow. We are to join the cosmic battle between good and evil armed with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and spirit. In what promises to be a contentious election season, Jesus calls us to answer hatred with kindness, anger with patience and hostility with love. Like Peter said, the Lord we follow is the Holy One of God who holds the words of eternal life. There is no greater blessing than to put on his armor and abide in him. Amen.