

## We Are What We Eat

This morning, we come to the end of King David's story. Our lectionary skips the final months of David's life, so here's a synopsis. David has grown elderly and frail. His son Adonijah attempts to seize the throne, neglecting to involve the prophet Nathan in the coup. Nathan goes to Bathsheba and conspires with her to have David designate her son, Solomon, as his heir. Solomon would never have come to the throne otherwise – he's about tenth in line – but Nathan and Bathsheba persuade David to abdicate in Solomon's favor. David warns the newly crowned Solomon always to walk in God's ways and keep his commandments, and they agree on a scheme to punish David's enemies. Only then can David finally rest in peace.

God is curiously silent throughout this intrigue. Nathan appears to act without divine guidance. Bathsheba is the woman whose beauty inspired David's fall from God's grace; we wouldn't expect the Lord to want her son on the throne. Adonijah, whose name means "my lord is Adonai," is Solomon's half-brother. We might expect the Lord to object when Solomon has Adonijah killed. We might expect the Lord to be displeased when Solomon worships on a mountaintop and not before the Ark of the Covenant, or when he marries a princess from Egypt, the very country from which Adonai rescued his enslaved people. And yet, Adonai appears to Solomon in a dream, promising him riches and honor when the young king asks for wisdom. Perhaps Adonijah offended the Lord when he dishonored his father by moving against him. Perhaps this is another instance of Adonai favoring the youngest son, just as he did with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and David himself. Perhaps God wants his chosen people to learn once again that mortal kings care for themselves, and not their subjects. Or perhaps Adonai has concluded that his fallen human children can't or won't resist the temptation to grab power by violent means and has resigned himself to working with whichever flawed soul emerges at the top of the

political heap once the slaughter finally ends. Whatever the Lord's reasons, Solomon's reign begins in a bloody mess, his celebrated wisdom notwithstanding. As Walter Dietrich observes in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, "[t]he reader cannot feel pleased about the outcome that the kingdom is now firmly in Solomon's hands."

With that background, let's move to this morning's Gospel. Jesus continues the Bread of Life Discourse. Having identified himself as the "Bread of Life," Jesus promises to give his "flesh" for the life of the world. When the synagogue leaders ask how Jesus could give them his flesh to eat, he replies, "[v]ery truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." As the Reverend Frank S. Logue observed in his 2018 sermon, "Living Bread," "[e]ven as Jesus is saying these words you can imagine some would-be disciples slipping to the back of the crowd before making a beeline home ... Knowing Jesus as a great teacher is one thing, but talking about your flesh as food and your blood as drink must have sounded like the rabbi had lost it."

Jesus makes this teaching even more difficult by using some pretty disturbing language. To describe his body, Jesus uses the word *sarx* (σάρξ), which Strong's Lexicon initially translates as "the meat of an animal (as food)." In an article for this month's edition of *The Christian Century*, the Reverend Katie Hines-Shah quips, "[t]he Greek word *sarx* could well be translated as 'hamburger.' To think of communion like this is challenging. More than one pastor has a story of a child really hearing the words of institution and responding with, 'Eww, gross.'" Kids aren't alone in struggling with this passage. Even the great Martin Luther, who could get pretty earthy now and then, objected to it. Reverend Hines-Shah quotes Luther's sermons on John 6 thusly:

“‘This cannot be applied to the sacrament,’ he writes. This is not ‘the sort of flesh from which red sausages are made.’” Unless, of course, that’s exactly what Jesus means.

Bible scholars are divided on whether Jesus intended these references to his flesh and blood to be sacramental. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper with a comfortably metaphorical meal of bread and wine. Not so in John’s Gospel. His Last Supper gives us foot washing, but not the Eucharist. If Jesus refers at all to our ceremony of wine and bread in John, he does so in this Bread of Life Discourse. But perhaps Jesus isn’t referring to the Eucharist. Perhaps, instead, he’s talking about the sacrificial aspect of his mission. The Hebrew people have been sacrificing animals to Adonai and eating their roasted meat for centuries when Jesus speaks these words. When he refers to his flesh and blood, perhaps he’s prefiguring the offering of his physical flesh and blood at the Crucifixion, not instituting the Eucharist. Or perhaps it’s a bit of both.

Jesus’s use of *sarx* in this passage echoes the first chapter of John’s Gospel: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” By taking on flesh to become one of us, Jesus reminds us that we, too, are creatures of flesh and blood or, as Peter, Paul and Mary put it in “The Garden Song,” “we are made of dreams and bones.” One of the weaknesses of institutional Christianity, I think, is that we sometimes try to deny our bones altogether by focusing too much on our dreams. Yes, we should try to live wisely, as the author of the letter to the Ephesians urges, not letting our physical appetites lead us too far astray. But as David and Solomon have shown us, even the greatest and wisest among us sometimes fall prey to our earthly desires and ambitions. As Reverend Hines-Shah writes, “[t]he living bread of heaven came down from heaven into the realities of human life. Christ followers too must be willing to come down from their lofty ideals and enter the messiness, the offensiveness, of human need.”

So, when Jesus assures us that eating his body and drinking his blood allows us to abide in him and he in us, maybe we shouldn't be too finicky about it. Maybe we should admit that, when we want something badly enough and are powerful enough not to have to worry about the consequences of our actions, human beings can be downright bloodthirsty. If we're being honest, we have to admit that we need a God who not only loves us for our noblest spiritual aspirations, but also accepts our very real physical needs. As one of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom, playfully put it, Jesus's Incarnation allows us not only to look upon Jesus, but to "fix [our] teeth on his flesh and become commingled with Him," uniting ourselves to his presence, his body, and his love.

In a moment, we'll celebrate Holy Communion, the precious sacrament given by Jesus as a "sure and certain sign" of God's grace. If part of you still wants to say "eww" after reading this morning's Gospel, that's okay. Come to the table anyway. As Bible scholar Karoline M. Lewis writes, "the offer of [Jesus's] flesh is first and foremost connected with abundant life here and now and not just the resurrection, and certainly not just the crucifixion. If there is any eucharistic theology to be gleaned from the Gospel of John, it needs to be one that is a celebration of abundant life with God now and not a remembrance of Jesus's life soon to pass away." When we partake of the bread and wine, we abide in Christ, and he abides in us. The way it works is something of a mystery but, as our Catechism reminds us, although its outward signs are bread and wine, the inward sign and "spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith ... The benefits we receive are forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life." Loving and trusting Jesus, we are called to share in the abundant life and grace he offers. After all, we are what we eat. Amen.