



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR AUGUST 5, 2018,
THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B, ARE:
EXODUS 16:2-4, 9-15; PSALM 78: 23-29; EPHESIANS 4:1-16; JOHN 6:24-35

ABIDING MEMORIES

John 6:24-35 [The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand 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."]

Well, good morning. It is so good to be back with you this morning. I am grateful for the sabbatical time away, and so very grateful for the privilege of serving again here in this wonderful community.

I go away and what do you do—you have the Presiding Bishop come and bring down the house. And not to be outdone, last week our

Evensong Choir sang in Canterbury Cathedral and was chummy with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Maybe I should go away more often...

In all seriousness though, I knew this community would fling wide its doors and be about the hospitality that defines us as people of faith, with careful planning and execution,

and he was still talking about his time in Seattle weeks later at General Convention in Austin. So thank you to all who made that evening so memorable for so many.

Meanwhile, Kathy and I were in Europe laying down some memories of our own, some of which I will share in today's forum.

At this point I want to tell you about an experience that occurred one morning in early May, a few days into our six weeks stay on the Greek island of Patmos in the south Aegean Sea. We stayed in a small house on the hillside overlooking Skala, the sleepy bay-side village where the ferries and fisherman came and went each day. Just above us were the ancient Roman ruins of the acropolis, and across the valley to the south was the sister mountain atop which sat Hora, and the 12th Century Orthodox monastery that is the reason this island is inhabited at all. There are about a thousand residents in these two towns, and a cobblestone path has connected them for centuries, with the Cave of the Apocalypse a midway point in the trail. That is where St. John supposedly received his vision that we know as the Book of Revelation.

On this particular morning, we had hiked up the trail, as we did several times in our stay, and after visiting the monastery, we wandered through the narrow streets of Hora for a time. Just exploring...

To say they were streets is overstating it a bit, because the lanes are maybe eight feet wide,

snaking around in no apparent grid or pattern. No cars are allowed in Hora's interior; only people on feet and small motorcycles.

The buildings are all painted white in typical Mediterranean style, and the residences are connected one to another, so that a lane is guarded on either side by one long phalanx of front doors that arc this way and that with the winding lane. They all look very similar and there are no street addresses on the island of Patmos, but the monastery at city center stands as a beacon on the hill for quick reorientation.

At one point we picked up the delicious aroma of someone baking with cinnamon. (You know that smell, right?) Like hound dogs, we were on the scent, making this turn and that, trying to locate the source. We'd lose the smell and back track till we picked it up again and found another winding lane, and another and another, till finally we discovered the tiny bakery from whence it came.

As we entered, the woman greeted us warmly, *kalimera*. She knew a little English as we attempted to explain our following the scent, longing to know what it was. She pointed at first to the day-old stuff on shelves in plastic bags, but finally understood we were asking about what had just come out of the oven.

She left us and returned with two small cookie twists—*koulorakia*—a gift, warm, slightly sweet. You get the picture... They were delicious, melt-in-your-mouth manna



from heaven. We bought a few more to share (but they didn't last but a few minutes).

A few days later, after a little internet researching, Kathy tried her hand at these simple oil, honey and flour twists, and they, too, were delicious fresh out of the oven, but by the next day they were stale and held little interest.

We returned twice more to that little bakery, but neither day were they cooking, and the singular memory of that one day's delectable treat remains a prize gift.

Memory is one of life's important meaning-markers. Memory is an integral aspect of identity, it contextualizes who we are, our past, present and even shapes our understanding of the future. And the most vigorous memories are often laid down in reference to our senses—sight and sound, taste and smell, and touch. Our liturgies are designed with these sensorial touchpoints as markers, as memory-makers, always pointing to the holy experience symbolized by them.

I'm reminded of Auden's sublime little poem, *Precious Five*, an ode to the five

senses, in which he concludes that our task in life is really to "*Bless what there is for being.*"ⁱ To receive the experience of life, even in its difficulties, as an opportunity to search for the blessings, and to claim them, and then to give thanks, for that is what we were created for.

My memory of *koulorakia*, simple as it may have been, perhaps can serve as a nexus for our scripture stories today, of manna and the bread of life. In today's gospel, people have tracked down Jesus, hounds on the scent, because a few verses earlier, we're told that he fed them with remarkable generosity, miraculous generosity—thousands of them on a hillside. They apparently are hungry again, and have returned to him to say, "Jesus, do it again!"

Jesus sees it as a teaching moment, and offers a different invitation, this time not for more simple bread that will be stale soon thereafter, but the bread that lasts, the bread that endures. The Greek word actually used here and elsewhere in John's gospel is *meno*, which is best understood as abiding. This bread of life abides because it is about more than physical nourishment. It is intimate, relational, life-giving. Elsewhere in the gospel this verb describes the relationship that Jesus shares with God and the Holy Spirit, it is an abiding relationship, and here he is inviting us into that realm of holy experience.ⁱⁱ

Eternal life is scriptural shorthand for this holy experience of abiding with the divine,

not understood as something experienced only later, downline, in an “after” life (which is an oxymoron if you stop to think about it), but here and now, as partakers of the bread of life, as ones who enact the memory week by week so that we know in our bones that the abiding love of God is effusively given as a gift, simple and sweet, and often subtle, but also eternally. It’s the means by which we come to understand the whole of life, our very being, our past, present and future—all of it is gathered up into God’s work of blessing all that is, including you and me.

I’ve missed being at this table with you all, precisely because I believe something holy happens here. The morsel’s caloric count will not require two hands even; it’s nutritional value to the flesh will be burned off before the final amen of this service; any leftovers would be stale by this time tomorrow. Good for croutons maybe, but not much else.

But in this moment, in this Eucharist, we remember the poignant promise made by

Jesus, that the bread of life is offered freely as a gift to you and me, and to all who long for the abiding love of God. It is the bread that lasts, and we gather with him, and those people in Galilee, and those who have died, and those yet to come, and we remember. We re-member the promise.

The Greek word for thank-you is *efcharisto*, a modern variant of the ancient word *eucharisto*. The Holy Eucharist. This is our meal of thanksgiving, the gifts of God given to the People of God. A holy experience which inspires us to move through life, moment by moment, with gratitude, with thankfulness in our hearts and minds, and on our lips, so we might bless what there is for being.

For that you were created.

ⁱ <https://poemanalysis.com/precious-five-by-w-h-auden-poem-analysis/>

ⁱⁱ Some thematic elements drawn from essay by Victoria Lynn Garvey, *The Christian Century*, July 18, 2018. Pg. 20