

Date: Sunday August 2, 2009

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Title: “This I Believe?”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): The Israelites complained in the wilderness. God provided in a way that went far beyond what they could imagine or that they could provide for themselves.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God knows us and the challenges we face. God provides for us in a way that meets our needs – not our wants. Thank God!

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Picture this - it’s a beautiful summer night outside of Dairy Queen. Isn’t that an appealing thought? We are standing outside of Dairy Queen dreaming of a Blizzard – the ice cream kind that is - when we overhear a mom say to a child, “Here are some shiny new quarters. I’ll give you a choice. You can use those quarters to buy an ice cream cone, or you can take them to church and put them in the offering plate.” The child thinks for a moment and then responds, “I’ll get the ice cream, give the quarters to the boy working at Dairy Queen, and tell him to put them in the offering plate.” I admit I have an appreciation for the child’s thought, which I find to be stewardship and evangelism all combined along with enthusiasm for good ole’ ice cream (Flynn).

I also have an appreciation for a simple yet profound statement made by a professor, David Bartlett from Chicago. He said, “Nobody is an unbeliever. Even people who say they don’t believe in God, they still believe in something. The question becomes, what do we believe.”

Reverend Sallie Watson pointed out in a sermon that I read this week that

there is a wonderful weekly feature on NPR radio called “This I Believe.” I first heard about this program from our own Steve Cain. Thank you, Steve. I did a little research on the program and here is what I found. It originally started in the 1950’s and was hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow. Each day, Americans gathered by their radios to hear compelling essays from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, and Harry Truman as well as corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists, and secretaries—anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived. These essayists’ words brought comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism, and racial division. (These essays, by the way, are now featured in weekly broadcasts on certain satellite and public radio shows). Then, for whatever reason, the program fizzled out. But it has been revived. In reviving “This I Believe,” one of the show’s executive producers has said, “The goal is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs. Rather, the hope is to encourage people to begin the much more difficult task of developing respect for beliefs different from their own” (thisibelieve.org). I appreciate that sentiment, as well. So today you might hear stories from the like of Bill Gates or Gloria Steinem. You might hear beliefs from a retired teacher or a woman who just buried her father. You could quite possibly hear something from our very own Steve Cain. I began to wonder, what I would write about.

What would you write about? What basic belief is at the core of your being? What story is so foundational that you would pull it up out of the recesses of your memory and share it on national radio? There are no unbelievers in the world so

what do you believe?

The early church used stories to tell the world what it believed. The story from Exodus (16:2-4, 9-15) that we read here today, bread from heaven, echoes throughout both the Old and New Testament including today's reading from John. If the Hebrews were asked to write an essay for NPR about what they believe, they would surely write about this story of bread. They might say, "We were thinking that slavery was better than freedom but then God provided for us in ways that we could not provide for ourselves. That's the story we want to tell."

Our choice is do we believe what they believe? Believing that biblical story is not our only option, as you very well know. There are a lot of stories that vie for our attention in this day and time. Some are better than others. Lots of people stand to profit if we choose to believe their stories, stories like: "Having the newest and latest gadget will make life easier." Or, "Don't pay off the bills—consolidate all the debt onto a credit card, and then you can charge more!" Or, "One bottle of this will make you look younger." There's "You're nobody unless you wear these shoes or these clothes." Or my personal favorite right now, "Find untold wealth through Cash for Gold."

Those are some of the stories demanding our attention and we know that there are a million more. If we choose to buy into stories like those, then here's how our essay for "This I Believe" might sound: "I don't have enough. I want to spend what I don't have. I can control how I look and how long I live. The most important thing to me is to be like everyone else. I am willing to use more of the world's resources and my own so that what I want is always in season. I know that

money rules. No matter how many times God has come through for me in the past, I still can't believe that God will come through yet again."

I don't know for sure about you, but I don't want that to be the governing story of my life. But when I forget that Jesus is the bread of life, as he proclaims today in John (6:35), then I settle for the "junk food" of the material possession and consumerism focused world. When I do that, the message that my life communicates becomes pretty shallow as in I am not enough, I have to be something else, which is something other than what I am.

But there is good news and that good news is that God knows us. God knows we are courted by a million seductive messages every day. So today we have a most powerful message available to us at this very table. The broken and shared bread of heaven has far more power than any bread which we might keep unbroken and hoarded for ourselves.

The radical act of choosing to gather around this table says that we believe in God's providence, God's provide-ence, God's ability to abundantly provide everything—not what we say we want, not what we are told we should be after, but what God knows we need—because God has done exactly that in Jesus Christ. Our Lord, our Savior, is exactly what we need – he is bread of life.

In what God provides for us around this table, we have more than enough. We can share everything we've got, and there will still be enough. Our lives are blessed by abundance. We are not controlled by the sin of scarcity. In our scripture readings this morning the bread from heaven comes from God. Jesus makes that point clear in the Gospel reading when the crowds imply it came from Moses. It

was from God. And Pharaoh didn't provide manna for the Hebrews; God gave them as much as they needed; God gives us as much as we need. There is true abundance with God.

That's what happens around this table. Through the gift of God's Son, God blesses what we have, who we are, and where we are, and we have as much as we need. The Lord's Supper is not a reward we earn because of any past good behavior on our part. This place we gather and the food we receive are gifts given to us by a generous, loving, and gracious God.

But if we're going to say "This I believe," about the bread of heaven, then the question becomes how much do we have to believe? Do we have to see the miracle to believe? How do we know for sure that all the things we read about this morning actually happened?

Scholars have written entire papers about what they think the manna might have been. One thing they have discovered is in that part of the world, there is this natural covering made from yummy things like "bug resin" that crops up in the spring and coats the desert. Maybe that was the manna.

The real point of the story is that it is not about sleight of hand. Something happened with those traveling from Egypt to Israel. They ate when they thought they were going to starve. For us the essence of the story is not about figuring out what happened, how the manna got there, but about having trust in God's ability and willingness to provide. The headline in the paper in the ancient time might have been, "God Saves!" The question of the day for is, "What do we believe?"

Miracles by their very nature cannot be explained rationally. The point of

the story isn't to amaze us when food just suddenly appears. The real miracle is that no matter what happened, God has this way of lavishly and lovingly providing exactly what we need, when we need it—and in the way that we need it for this day. Believing that is the important step in our relationship with God.

“Nobody is an unbeliever; what do we believe.” Do you believe that taking a little, little piece of store-bought wafer and a tiny little bit of fruit of the vine will make a difference in life? I can't convince you. I can invite you. You have to taste, see, and experience for yourself.

But when we choose to receive the gift of the bread and cup this morning that God gives us, then we are putting beliefs into action. We are saying that bread for this day alone is enough. We are saying that, no matter how attractive the other offers may be, we know that their ultimate claim to power is bogus. We are saying that we know we're not self-sufficient. We are saying that God in God's economy can provide everything we need. We are saying that even when we are lost in the wilderness, we know God provides that which we cannot provide for ourselves. Today we are saying through receiving these gifts that we believe in God's goodness and generosity and grace so much that we are willing to share these wafers and this drink, even if we know this is all we have. All that belief in one little wafer and one little cup! That's what is happening at this table (www.goodpreacher.com) and that is good news.

You and I might get some of the things we think we want in life, but we are unable to provide for ourselves all the things that we ultimately need. That's because God gives us exactly what we need right where we are. My hope is that we will all live seeking that which God is ready to give rather than pursue that which we think we want. What happens at this table shows us with God's love, there's enough to go around and to satisfy every need. All of that I believe, including, ice cream is good. What do you believe? Let us pray.

God,

We hear the words that we cannot live by bread alone, but with your love, your gifts are overflowing and sufficient, even the bread of life. Grant us the ability to discern between that which fulfills our cravings and that which embraces us for all eternity so that we know more fully your truth. This we pray in the name of the one who proclaims that he is the bread of life. Amen.

Offering: Let us give with thanksgiving for the all the gifts of God. The ushers will please come forward.

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless these gifts this day as a sign of our gratitude for your presence in our lives. We offer these gifts with deep thanksgiving. Amen.

Benediction: Go forth, filled with the gifts of God, blessed by the presence of Christ, and surrounded forever by the love of the Holy Spirit. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Flynn, Bernice and Leslie; Humorous Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes; Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI; 1973.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2009.

“This I Believe”; thisIbelieve.org; 2009.