

John 6:14-35
(Isaiah 55:1-2,6-7; 1 John 2:15-17)
“Bread of Life I”

Introduction

John six records a crucial and transitional chapter in the life and ministry of Jesus. It opens with Jesus at the height of his popularity, surrounded by crowds numbering in the thousands. It closes with Jesus abandoned, not only by the crowds but by most of his disciples. He sits alone with the twelve original disciples and asks them plaintively, Do you want to go away as well? Peter answers with words that have echoed across the centuries in the cries of God's people, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:67-69). What has happened? What has Jesus said, what has he done to cause such offense, to cause so many to abandon him and reject his ministry?

In a day when and a culture where church growth is touted as the greatest of goods and large churches are treated as though they had the most to teach us, I can't help wondering how many of us would still be around if we really understood what Jesus is saying to us. We see in these verses the kinds of things that separate us from Jesus, that cause him to send us on without him, as well as the kinds of things that draw him to us, that cause him to restore his mighty presence to us in the midst of life's storms. We also hear him teaching us, with echoes of the prophet Isaiah, not to waste our lives laboring for what cannot finally satisfy us, but rather to give ourselves to that which lasts for eternity.

This morning, I invite you to look with me at these four themes that emerge from the verses we read: What causes Jesus to withdraw his presence from us? What causes Jesus to return to his people in power? What is the food that perishes that we are in danger of wasting our lives pursuing? And, finally, what is the food that endures to eternal life, which alone is worthy of our time and effort, and which alone will give our lives the joy and meaning for which we long?

Body

1. What causes Jesus to withdraw his presence from his people?

In Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the storm, we are told that Jesus sent his disciples on without him. Why did he do this? Very simply, the people wanted religious and political leadership that required no sacrifice: the prophet and king, but not the priest and suffering servant God's leader, but not God's lamb. When Jesus begins to speak of sacrifice, of participation in his flesh and blood given for the world, they are offended and want no part. So too, today, the message of prosperity, of personal peace and affluence, of having my needs met rather than pouring out my life to meet the needs of others, is the stock and trade of large western churches, as we simply reflect and reinforce the idols of the surrounding culture. We want our political leaders to tell us what we want to hear that we can have peace and prosperity without sacrifice. We want our religious leaders to tell us of God's promised blessings, but not of God's call to sacrificial living.

What a contrast to what I saw these past two weeks in China!

2. What causes Jesus to come among his people in power?

When his disciples are in the midst of the storm, Jesus comes on the scene. He draws near to them, and they are more terrified by his presence than by the storm. John simply tells us that they were frightened, but Matthew and Mark tell us that they cried out in their fear. When they cried out, Jesus answered them, joined them in the midst of the storm.

3. What is the food that perishes?

The food that perishes is, quite simply, when we want to live off of and enjoy the gifts of God more than we want to live off of and enjoy a relationship with God himself. God knows our need for our daily bread, and Jesus taught his disciples to ask for it: Give us this day our daily bread. But neither our daily bread nor the other necessities of life, much less the pleasures and luxuries that our culture offers as the answer to the quest for a meaningful life, can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. God has as Augustine famously observed made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

4. So, then, what is the food that endures to eternal life?

The food that endures is obviously nothing less than a living, intimate relationship with the God who made us and fashioned us for just such a relationship. But how are we to know him? Where is he to be found? Where does one begin? What does God require of me? Jesus answers those questions by identifying himself as the bread of life: I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35).

Conclusion

So, what are you going to do about this? Are you going to go with the crowd and abandon Jesus because he tells you the hard truth that the world does not want to hear? Or will you turn to him now, confess your brokenness and need, and receive the gift of life? He calls us to die to our self, to our pride and ambition and insistence on having our own way, so that we can finally become the people we were created to be, and begin to live the life we were created to live, a life filled with joy and meaning, involved in the most significant thing of all the only thing that lasts unto eternity: the pursuit of his kingdom and righteousness. How will you respond?