

The Bread of Life
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Today's reading from Ephesians is short, but it pretty much says it all – don't lose sight of your purpose in life. Don't let earthly distractions keep you from your purpose and don't let the days deceive you into thinking that you have time to waste away doing nothing.

The reading from Kings touches on a similar theme as God tells Solomon he's pleased that the young king has greater concern for his people and how best to rule them than he does for riches and power. Solomon is thinking of his purpose – using the gifts God gave him in order to be the best ruler he can be for his people – and God rewards him for his strength and character. Solomon did not stray from his path in the way his father did.

Today's gospel reading from John solidifies the thought in our minds by telling us not only that God wishes us to achieve everlasting life but also that he has a plan for getting us there. All we have to do is follow the path. We even have a guide, Jesus tells us – a rule book called The Word of God.

But the gospel isn't as straight forward as that, and in reading it a few times I determined there are three separate meanings we might conclude:

There's the more literal interpretation – that Jesus is predicting his death.

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven," he says. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

I grew up Catholic and can certainly understand that literal interpretation that Jesus' sacrifice becomes – during every Sunday's ritual of Holy Eucharist – not merely a symbol of his love but a physical transformation. The bread and wine of the Mass become, through the priest's blessing, the actual body and blood of Jesus.

But the Jews weren't buying it. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" they asked.

Well, probably Jesus was talking literally when he told his disciples to eat him. If he was in fact predicting his sacrifice for humankind, he was doing it metaphorically, referencing the day when the world of greed, hatred, and, yes, politics, would consume him. On that day, we would require from him the sacrifice of his flesh to allow us access back onto the path toward heaven.

But there's another metaphorical meaning in there too – equally powerful for our daily lives as well as our hopes for eternal life – that unless we consume the spiritual food that God gives us, through Jesus's teachings, we have no hope of an afterlife.

How curious that Jesus breaks this news to his disciples so shortly after performing the miracle of the loaves and fishes, when he fed the multitudes with what turned out to be only three loaves of bread and five fish. As we know from the gospel reading a few weeks ago, Jesus did feed the crowd, and there was no catch at the time. But now he tells them something that might not settle too well with them:

You know that food I just gave you? Yeah, so, here's the thing. Man can't live by bread alone. And that goes for fish too.

Those who want eternal life need to eat of the bread that comes from heaven, he tells them. The bread, in this analogy, is the Word of God.

"We're talking dense, nutritious, deeply fulfilling, life-giving bread, he says, not empty calories. Because the manna your ancestors ate in the desert? Sure, it kept them alive at the time, but that was more like saltine crackers. I'm talking 17-grain bread – the kind with fruit and nuts in it that you make at home so you know all the ingredients are good.

"The bread of your ancestors isn't life-sustaining – at least not when it comes to eternal life."

That's because they didn't have the right ingredients, supplied to them by Jesus.

So what's in your pantry?

Do you have the bread of heaven, or is your life full of empty calories? Which thoughts, feelings, words, or actions do you let weasel their way into your diet? Greed? Revenge? Selfishness? Envy or an unwillingness to forgive?

Are you like King David, who could recognize the wrongdoing of others but couldn't see it in himself? Or are you like Solomon, who prays for the wisdom to be the leader his people need and the courage to be able to help those who need him?

Do you stray from the path of your life's work, because you think you have time to dilly dally along the way?

What do you consume, thinking it will fulfill you, even though it never does?

Which decisions might you make that leave you feeling weak or tired or spiritually underfed?

Because, with the bread of heaven, we can do anything – it gives us all the nutrients our lives need to serve our purpose on earth – as long as we don't let worldly distractions spoil our appetites.