



John 6:1-71—The Bread Which Gives Life to the World*

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I. CHAPTER 6 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL

The three year lectionary presents difficulties for the proclaimer involved in interpreting the Fourth Gospel. Since there is not a year given to the Gospel of John, it is divided up over the three years: 11 texts in Series A; 19 texts in Series B; and 10 texts in Series C, for a total of 40 texts. This solution gives “equal time” to each of the evangelists over the three liturgical years (Matthew—41 texts in Series A, Mark—33 texts in Series B, Luke—42 texts in Series C), but does not allow the pastor to develop the portrait of Jesus in John’s Gospel as with the synoptic gospels.

In Series B, however, the lectionary has clustered five texts from John 6 in consecutive Sundays. From the 10th Sunday after Pentecost to the 14th, we meet the following texts: John 6:1-15, 24-35, 41-51, 51-58 and 60-69. If you are a solo pastor, preaching on the same chapter in John for the four Sundays in August and Labor Day weekend is not the most attractive option. Vacation plans might thankfully intervene in your schedule. If you serve in a staff situation, more than likely the one who is up for the Sunday following your sermon on John 6 will kindly inform you that you just preached the sermon being developed from the text for the next Sunday. If you find yourself in either situation, you might wonder what to do that is responsible and faithful not only to the text but also to your context of ministry. It is a splendid opportunity to help your congregation begin to see the majesty and depth of this Gospel as seen through one of its finest chapters. To accomplish this we also need a continuous reading of chapter 6.

Let us begin by suggesting that, like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the evangelist responsible for the Fourth Gospel is a gifted artist. The writer of John’s

*This essay is based in part on a discussion in which the following participated along with the author: Stanley N. Olson of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, and Pastor Gregg Helland, Our Father’s Lutheran Church, Rockford, Minnesota.

Gospel may even be credited with being a dramatist. At the beginning of chapter 6 we have a staging direction: it is the time of Passover (6:4). This is not an insignificant program note; it permeates this chapter. Passover is the context in which we hear about God’s time of deliverance, preservation and provision in Israel’s experience of the Exodus and wilderness wandering. In the Fourth Gospel, Passover is the time of Jesus’ presence, likewise a time of God’s presence.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the festival events in Israel’s life serve as the primary

context in which we meet Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph. On the *Sabbath* Jesus heals an invalid (John 5) and a blind beggar (John 9). In response to Jesus' deeds of healing counsel is taken to put him to death (5:18-19) and an incredulous denial is made by the witnesses: "Certainly we aren't blind are we?" (9:40). The crucial scene in the opening of the Gospel, the cleansing of the Temple (2:13-33), takes place at the time of *Passover* (2:13, 23). "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17) from Psalm 69:9 is the focus for this time of *Passover* and indeed the purpose of Jesus' ministry throughout the Fourth Gospel. Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time during *Passover* (11:55, 12:1, 13:1), eating with friends in Bethany and the disciples in Jerusalem. But Jesus will not be alive to eat a *Passover* meal, for his zeal to make known the presence of God will have consumed him on the cross that afternoon.

The only time the *Festival of Tabernacles* is noted in the entire New Testament is in John 7:2. During these days of celebration (7:14, 37), the revelation of Jesus as the Christ becomes more strongly opposed and judged by the people. Ironically this takes place during the festival that celebrates God's living presence (tenting, tabernacling) with Israel in the wilderness. Also to be noted is the single occurrence in the New Testament of the *Festival of Re-dedication* (Hannukah) in John 10:22. As Jesus is walking in the porticos of Solomon's rebuilt temple (10:23), Jesus responds to the questions of Messiahship with the words, "I and the Father are one" (10:30). For such an audacious claim, Jesus is charged with blasphemy and nearly stoned (10:31-33).

As we enter the passion narrative in the Fourth Gospel, it does not surprise us to find that the context for Jesus' death will be that of the *Day of Preparation* (19:14, 31, 42). During this day the *Passover* lambs are prepared for the evening *Passover* meal. It is the time in which Jesus, the *Passover* lamb, is crucified on the cross. As he cried out in thirst, vinegar is held to his lips on a hyssop reed (19:29), recalling the reed used to spread the blood of the *Passover* lamb on the doorposts in Egypt (Ex 12:22). Jesus' legs are not broken as he is taken down from the cross (19:33), that the prescription for the *Passover* lamb might be fulfilled: "Not a bone of him shall be broken" (19:36, citing Ex 12:46; Nu 9:12; Ps 34:20).

Truly the festival life of God's people serves as the context for Jesus' life, ministry and death. It is this broader context throughout the Fourth Gospel that informs the *Passover* setting in chapter 6. The feeding of the 5,000 taking place on *Passover* is highly significant in light of the drama of Jesus's life. Israel's life is the context in which we see God's presence. God is present with people, covenanting, disciplining, loving, delivering, providing and feeding.

This is the God John's Gospel would portray for us, and the one through whom we see and believe such a God is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the protagonist of this drama. He takes center stage, but not to call attention to self. Jesus alone can reveal this God: "No one has ever seen God, the only Son/God who dwells in the fold of the Father's garment, this one has exegeted him" (1:18), which is the concluding word of the prologue and the introduction to the revelation present in chapter 6. In this chapter God will be made known to us. There will be continuity with the drama we know from Israel's wilderness days of wandering, when God provided bread (manna) and water. There will also be newness as now Jesus alone is the one in whom this bread comes to us.

The Gospel of John is the product of careful reflection on and proclamation of the person

of Jesus Christ. It is the impact of the Word become flesh in the life of the Christian community that has brought this Gospel to literary expression.¹ A previous generation of scholarship was content to identify the Fourth Gospel as a “late gospel” and reflective of “Hellenistic” life and culture, which, being interpreted, meant that the gospel was composed no earlier than the last decade of the first century and more likely written in the earliest decades of the second century. The Hellenistic identity signaled that it was more related to a Greek world of thought than a Jewish milieu. Current work would not sharply divide between the two but note the mutual influence. Today the Fourth Gospel is more commonly seen to be a literary product of the decade of the 80s of the first century and reflective of the emerging struggle of the Jewish synagogue community with Jewish messianists who confess Jesus to be the Christ.²

But how does the story unfold? The drama draws us into itself, so that as exegetes we might be the playwrights of this word for our time. This is the audacious claim and promise the word of the Fourth Gospel would have upon our lives. Perhaps over one, two or even five Sundays, the word of this text will live in our lives and in the lives of those to whom we are called to proclaim this living word of bread, to those who continue to hunger for that which God alone can supply and will supply in this Word.

II. THE DRAMA OF CHAPTER 6

10th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary, 6:1-15; Our proposal, 6:1-21)

The stage is set. The drama will begin on a mountain with people who have been drawn into the unfolding story of the Gospel through the ministry of Jesus. Their curiosity has been aroused, for people who were ill and crippled are

¹One of the most helpful secondary resources that explicates a two-level drama [(1) the life and ministry of Jesus, and (2) the life and witness of the Johannine community] in the Fourth Gospel is the volume by J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

²Another helpful secondary resource to the current thought on the literary development of the Johannine tradition is found in the volume by Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979). Brown and Martyn are colleagues on the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Their indebtedness to each other's careful and creative work is noted by way of agreements and disagreements in the volumes noted.

now living (4:50, 51, 53) and whole (5:6, 9, 11, 14, 15). The disciples express their helplessness over the number of people who are more than the present provision of food and money can possibly handle: “How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?” (6:5); “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (6:7). The ingredients of the drama are heightened by the helplessness of the disciples and the meagerness of a young boy's lunch.

In Jesus' word to the disciples in Samaria, we are aware that “looking up and seeing” (4:35, 6:5) the crowds is the sign that the fields are ripe for harvest. In this setting Jesus takes the provisions, gives thanks and single-handedly distributes bread and fish in an abundance so great that the disciples are enlisted to gather the fragments that nothing might be lost. What is the response? “This is indeed a prophet who is come into the world!” (6:14). Is this the correct response? No, for as the dramatic scene concludes, Jesus withdraws to a mountain by himself, as

the people seek to make him king (6:15). Where does one go with such a dramatic scene?

The questions remain unanswered as in the opening scene of a well-constructed drama. The protagonist has been set forth. Our task is not to explain the text, but rather to be faithful to it as it draws us into the presence of God's glory. We must permit it to have its word and its power in our lives. Must the one who reveals such a God be forced to withdraw because of our attempt to make this living presence into something we can understand? Surely Jesus must be someone like we know a prophet or a king to be. We can understand someone who speaks the Word of God or reigns over people, supplying their needs, but *to be* the Word of God is something quite different. Yet, this is the keynote of this Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the sign of the feeding we see this Word.

It is the vision of God present in the feeding that calls for the inclusion of the crossing of the sea (6:16-21). All of us have rowed a boat *not* going "gently down the stream." In such a situation we are against odds that might be life threatening. The waters of chaos and destruction have been near to all of us. Relief comes only when land has been reached and the danger past. So it was for the disciples when Jesus came to them in the word "I am." This is simply a word of identification—"It is me"—but also in such peril it is more. Jesus' word recalls the identification of God in the Hebrew tradition (Ex 3:14; Isa 41:4; 43:10, 25; 45:18; 46:4; 51:12; 52:6). Now the "I am" is spoken by Jesus, our first encounter with this identity in the Fourth Gospel.³ We hear the "I am" several times in this Gospel, and it is one of the dramatic links with the occurrences in the ongoing discourse (6:35, 41, 48, 51). In a masterful way this dramatic scene concludes with Jesus entering the boat, as the trip comes to an abrupt ending: "...and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going" (6:21). Curtain.

Through the setting of Passover, the feeding of hungry people, and the crossing of the sea we have been introduced into the unfolding drama of this

³A helpful study on the theological importance of the "I am" sayings is found in the volume by Philip B. Harner, *The "I Am" of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

chapter. What all of this means, we are not sure. We do know that we have become involved in the story and for now that is enough. God is revealed in Jesus Christ. The compassionate God who cared for people with food in the wilderness wanderings, is present in Jesus' ministry, with provision enough for all people today.

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary, 6:24-35; Our proposal, 6:22-34)

The drama enacted in 6:1-21 has set the stage for the development which follows. The central figure has been revealed in the feeding of the 5,000 and the crossing of the sea. Unanswered questions accompany us from these events as we are brought into the presence of God's revelation. Now the evangelist begins to fill out the portrait of the one who lies behind the inauguratory revelation.

The people (literally, the crowd) that witnessed the feeding become the eyes through which we too shall see the revelation. Their eyes, like ours, are dull for they are caught up only in what they see and experience. Their sight does confirm that Jesus had not gotten into the only boat available with his disciples (6:22-24). Only the disciples have seen and heard in the "I am" how Jesus has moved to the new setting—the town of Capernaum. As the crowd discovers Jesus

in Capernaum, another aspect of the misunderstanding of the feeding is disclosed. Jesus notes that their reason for seeking him is that they saw in him one who provided bread so that they could eat their fill of the loaves (6:25-26). In Jesus' words we hear and see how the sign of the feeding went "unseen."

How will the evangelist develop the perplexing reality of the lack of sight? As the dialogue partners become engaged we hear how misunderstanding reigns. Certainly there must be something we can learn from this. How can the sign be seen? The difficulty for them and for us is found in the reality that God is present in the bread. What they saw, tasted and swallowed was what their previous experience prepared them to receive—bread. Yes, it was even barley bread, the poorest of the grains. Was it any wonder that God couldn't be seen in such a sign? God is present in the common. It is not our work that can bring us to the point of sight, when we might believe that God is present in this bread. It is God's sign/bread which is given to us as gift: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him (Jesus) whom he (God) has sent" (6:29). Could there be anything more clearly expressed than this? But wait. The crowd still has not seen and heard; they ask Jesus, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?" (6:30).

With these questions we are brought back to square one. Nothing appears to have happened to the sight of the people. They, like us, are blind to the sign/work of God. Can Jesus really accomplish the purpose of the Gospel—to make God known? The evangelist takes our perplexity and uses it as the occasion for yet another word or act of revelation, this time by a story. Do you remember the manna in the wilderness story? The people themselves make the connection, but their own connection to the story needs revelation. As God *gave* the bread in the wilderness, so God *gives* "the true bread from heaven" (6:32). This bread is that which also gives "life to the world" (6:33). The connection should be clear: God then; God now. But is the connection made? Do they understand now? "Lord, give us this bread always" (6:34). Curtain.

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The scene is not resolved. The tension of the text remains. (For this reason the text ought to be concluded with 6:34, with 6:35 serving as the opening verse for the next scene.) Is the request one of sight and belief? Do they see that God is indeed present in the bread or do they remain sightless to God's presence and "see" only bread? We don't know. The evangelist leaves us with our questions. The evangelist has caught us between belief and unbelief in the presence of God's revelation. Isn't this reality? Isn't this what the evangelist would have us "see"? The gift and the reception of this gift is God's work in our world. This is the focus of this act in John's unfolding drama: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him (Jesus) whom he (God) has sent" (6:29).

12th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary, 6:41-51; Our proposal, 6:35-51)

If one were to begin this text with 6:35 and continue to 6:51, the four "I am" sayings in this chapter would be included. Once again the evangelist has orchestrated our movement within the drama to its rising crescendo. Within these verses at the midpoint of the chapter we encounter the focal point of Jesus' identity. As it becomes clearer that Jesus is the one in whom God is present and revealed, the opposition to this revelation becomes more pronounced and rises in its own crescendo-like manner.

The portrait of the protagonist emerges in scandalous proportions at this stage of the drama. The opening announcement recalls the identity of Jesus as the gift of living water in the conversation with the Samaritan woman (4:7-15): “I am the bread of life; the one who comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35). In spite of the seeing and believing (6:36) that we have so far encountered, the promise of the Father still holds: “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and the one who comes to me I will not cast out” (6:37).

The gift of life sent in Jesus Christ has come from the God of creation. Nothing that God has entrusted to the Son will be lost (6:39). And in this, nothing could be clearer about God’s intention for all humanity: “...that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (6:40).

In 6:41 we meet for the first time in this chapter the term, “the Jews.” This grouping of people represents the chosen people of God. They are the ones closest to the revelation. The verse recalls the murmuring and grumbling that accompanied their trek with God in the wilderness. God’s presence in Jesus Christ also evokes a like response. God’s presence is not a new experience for them, but what is new is that God’s presence is now incarnated in the one who speaks the “I am”—“Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know.” And so they rightly ask: “How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” (6:42).

The Jews also speak for us who are also the people of God. We too want to believe that we have fully understood God. To such human thinking, the words of Jesus remind us of the theme established in 6:22-34—none come to Jesus unless the Father who sent Jesus draws them (6:44). It is God’s work; it is to this that we are pulled again and again. For this is the truth of God’s revelation as spoken by the prophet: “They shall all be taught by God” (Isa 54:13). This is the center of the revelation throughout the Fourth Gospel. Jesus Christ is the one

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exception who has seen God, for he is the one from God (6:46) and the one who has made God known (1:18). In Jesus’ revelation we might know the truth of God’s love. “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). The revelation of God is very sensory—seeing, hearing, learning, being drawn, all for the purpose of believing: “Truly, truly I say to you, the one who believes has eternal life” (6:47).

The final word in this scene must yet be spoken that the centrality of God’s revelation might once again be seen. The connection is once again made to the wilderness story. In that provision from God’s hand, people ate, but they also died. In contrast, God remains the giver of bread, but the former result no longer holds: “If anyone eats of this bread, that one will live for ever” (6:51). What is “this bread”? Is it like the manna we know? Yes, but this bread is specifically known in the one who will give his life for the life of the world. This bread is Jesus’ flesh! Flesh? Curtain.

Again the drama of these verses is packed with misunderstanding, remembering and murmuring. The murmuring will move to its next stage: dispute and argument. It will move to new heights of opposition to a revelation now made known in the undeniable reality of human life—flesh. Not in a mask of “appearance like” humanity, but true humanity—flesh. The center of the text has been reached. The unfolding drama has moved to its central focal point in Jesus Christ, the one who speaks the “I am” as the living bread of God present in the very material of

human life—flesh. In this gift God has given to the world the gift of life for all flesh.

13th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary, 6:51-58; Our proposal, 6:51-59)

The notation of the scene is excluded from our reading of 6:51-58 for this Sunday, but it ought to be included: “This he (Jesus) said in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum” (6:59). Just when the setting of the chapter changed from the town of Capernaum (6:24) to the synagogue in Capernaum, is not noted. Perhaps this is the Sunday to develop this important setting.

The dramatic conclusion of the previous scene has set the stage for the gospel for this Sunday. As we gather in our places of worship, we need to be reminded that they are also places that can make us uncomfortable. The revelation of God that takes place in worship is not something that can be domesticated and made palatable. God’s word is present in the flesh of human life. We may not want God this close, but we have no choice. This is the way God chooses to be present—incarnate in human flesh (6:51).

It is no wonder that those closest to God’s revelation, the Jews, became engaged in disputes over the crucial issue of God’s revelation: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52). As if this wasn’t offensive enough, Jesus heightens the reality with yet another ingredient of human life: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53). And again, still more offensively, Jesus speaks about eating his flesh, using the word that describes a wild animal gnawing or grinding his teeth on a bone. The word for audible mastication is used four times in these verses (6:54, 56, 57, 58) to describe the intimacy of God’s presence in the lives of those who believe.

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But this is experiencing God too closely. Since the story of the garden of Eden, we have wanted to hide from God. But God, the hound of heaven, continues to pursue us. God does so in love, a love which overcomes even our discomfort and rejection. It is only in the intimacy of God’s presence with us that we have the gift of life in Jesus Christ: “The one who gnaws on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (6:56). Is this too offensive?

Remember, it is Passover time. This is the setting throughout the unfolding drama of chapter six. It is the time when God delivers people from slavery, and it is the time when God feeds the freed captives in the wilderness. And, unlike its prototype of manna, this bread present in Jesus’ flesh is pure promise: “The one who gnaws on this bread will live for ever” (6:58). Curtain.

The setting is in the synagogue (6:59), the place where God’s people gather to hear the Word of the Lord. Such is also our setting. God’s Word is present; God’s provision is flesh and blood; God’s love is manifested in the one sent-Jesus Christ. The drama of these verses encompasses us. As the revelation becomes clearer and moves closer, our natural state of enmity with God becomes sharp. We seek refuge from God, and God will not have it so. This is the gospel. That which we choose to do is broken down, and we murmur (6:41, 43) and quarrel (6:52) among ourselves and against God. But even in this, the drama of closeness of God’s presence has not yet reached its climax.

14th Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary, 6:60-69; Our proposal, 6:60-71)

The final scene of chapter six concludes with those whom we met at the beginning—the

disciples. Through these persons we also see ourselves as twentieth century disciples of Jesus. The first disciples speak and react to God's revelation for us: "This is an unacceptable saying; who can listen to it?" (6:60). The final Sunday on the sixth chapter of John raises the question for us as we too have lived with God's revelation in Jesus Christ during these Sundays: Who is able to see and hear God's revelation?

The consolation for the first disciples and for us is found in the reprieve of the final scene. Jesus knows our situation. Jesus knows that his disciples are offended by the dramatic presence of God in such an intimate way. But Jesus is true to the intention of the gospel that he has come to make known this God (1:18,6:46). Jesus knows the answer to the question he asks: "Does this scandalize you?" (6:61). Yes, it does. Our enmity toward God is threatened by God invading the space of separation we have established. Left to our own, this is the only way we will have it.

Soon Jesus will not be present with the disciples in the way they now experience: "Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?" (6:62). Even in the return of Jesus to the Father, the Spirit/wind/ breath of God will be present and continue the gift of life. This presence will not be in the "flesh" of Jesus' life, which was given for the life of the world. However, it is through the giving of his life and the revealing words of God that Jesus has given to the disciples the gift of "spirit and life" (6:63). It is this word of which the believer is to avail oneself.

In spite of the gift of this word, the response of disbelief is present. The gift of believing remains the work of the Father: "This is the work of God, that

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you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29). Out of the dark night of disbelief will come the one who betrays the one who brings the light of God's revelation. Jesus knows this reality and the one whose betrayal will snuff out the life of the one who is the light of the world. This one comes from those closest to Jesus; he is one of his disciples.

But it is not just the one, Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who will actually betray him (6:71). In this final scene we also note that "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (6:66). To the twelve Jesus puts the question: "Certainly, you do not also wish to go away, do you?" (6:67). The question is asked in such a way that it anticipates a negative answer—"No." And so it is that we hear Peter's response: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68). Those closest to Jesus express the truth of the drama present throughout this chapter. In Jesus' provision of bread and in his word of identity as this bread, we have the gift that the God of creation can give—eternal life.

As we have been caught up in the drama of the chapter, we have seen the revealing clarity of God's revelation and the rising response of opposition to this revelation. Now we are led to the response of the chorus-like confession: "And we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (6:69).

The confession is a majestic note upon which to conclude this series of texts, and we could conclude here as the lectionary unit suggests. But this would not be appropriate to the drama of the chapter. The confession of believing and coming to know the truth of the revelation is never apart from its opposition and misunderstanding. Just as one of the twelve makes the climactic confession of faith that Jesus is indeed the Holy One come from God, so also one of the twelve is of the power of opposition and betrayal, the devil, the slanderer (6:70-71). Curtain.

III. EPILOGUE

The drama of God's revelation is not completed. It is not over for Jesus as the following chapter makes clear. It is the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2), the festival which celebrates God's living presence with the Israelites as they were led in the wilderness by a cloud and pillar. In this experience God "tented" with them. In this festival time the opposition to Jesus will attempt to kill him (7:1, 19, 25), to charge him with possessing a demon (7:20), and to arrest him (7:30, 32, 44). The drama of time will be brought to an end only when Jesus speaks the final word—from the cross: "It is completed" (19:30).

But still the drama is not over for us. We have become part of this revelation of life in the gift of God's living bread which has come from heaven and continues to give life to the world. We are the bearers of this word. It is a word incarnated in our lives in the one who became flesh and tented among us (1:14), the one who has made God known (1:18, 6:46).

This drama has refused to separate the real from the spiritual. The realm of heavenly gift is not separated from earthly reality. And neither must we interpret this chapter so as to divide the sacred from the secular. God is uncommonly

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present in our world through the poorest of people and in the poorest of provision—barley loaves and "tidbit" pieces of fish (6:9). It is from these meager provisions that God feeds the hungry, for it is God's gift of life to the world, present in Jesus Christ. Not by our work are we deserving of this daily provision, for it is the work of God that we are drawn into receiving. It is Jesus Christ who has made this word known, and it is through our words and deeds that the one become flesh for us feeds us and calls upon us to do likewise. He has given us the gift of life and provision for the life of the world. This drama will never end; we are the playwrights of this word for our time.