



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
December 24, 2025
Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Homily

The bread of life.

Manna from heaven.

Barbara Brown Tayler has an interesting take on the Manna in the wilderness. You'll remember that, when Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt to escape slavery, they started to starve in the wilderness.

But then a miracle happened: God sent bread.

The Bible says it was *like coriander seed, white [with] the taste of...honey.*

Barbara Brown Tayler points out that in the Sinai Peninsula, today, plant lice feed off the sap of local tamarisk trees. The sap itself is poor in nitrogen, so they have to eat huge amounts of sap to get enough nutrients to survive.

The result of this process is a fine white flake, rich in carbohydrates and sugars left behind by the bugs. The Bedouin who live there today actually gather it and bake it into bread.

I bet what you can't guess what they call it? *Manna.*

Now, is this also where the Biblical manna given to Moses and the Israelites came from?

Maybe.

Barbara Brown Tayler ends with these words:

Some believers reject this explanation because they think it takes away from the miracle of manna, but I wonder about that. Does manna have to come out of nowhere in order to qualify as a miracle?

She adds: *How you answer [this question] has a lot to do with how you sense God's presence in your life. If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to*

go hungry a lot. When you do not get the miracle you are praying for, you are going to think that God is ignoring you or punishing you or ...that God is not there...

If, on the other hand, you are willing to look at everything that comes to you as coming...from God, then there will be no end to the manna in your life.¹

It's an interesting question that Barbara Brown Taylor poses for us: Does our *bread of life* have to drop straight out of heaven to be miracle?

Now, the Christmas story is about a miracle dropping straight out of heaven, right?

The Christ child is announced by an angel to Mary. In Bethlehem, this unwed mother wraps him in bands of cloth and lays him in a manger; the angelic host appear, announcing a savior has been born.

Bread from heaven.

AJ Levine, whose lessons have been guiding our Adult Education throughout the weeks of Advent, points out the symbolic resonance of the manger.²

It is more than just an impromptu crib.

The Greek word for 'manger' here is φάτνη, from the root φατεῖν, which is the verb 'to eat.'

So, literally, the thing Mary places the Christ child in, is a φάτνη, a place for eating.

This same root word appears again at the end of the Gospels, when Jesus is having his last supper with his disciples. He takes bread, and says, "Take, eat (φάγετε), this is my body."

Fun fact: it's also the same root for the word 'glutton' in Luke 7: when Jesus tells the Pharisees: *the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton'* – he says, in Greek, φάγος, literally an over-eater.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (New York: Crowley, 1997), 9-10.

² AJ Levine, *The Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

So, “Manger” – “glutton” – and “Take, eat, this is my body” are all related to each other, in the original language of the Gospel.

The bread of life appears, from the start, in the Christmas story.

Which probably shouldn’t be all that surprising to us. After all, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says outright: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry” (6:35).

Throughout the Gospels, in ways subtle and in other ways outright, Jesus is the bread of life, appearing out of nowhere. As the angel says, when the heavenly host appears to the shepherds,

I am bringing you good news of great joy...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior... And this shall be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

There’s that word again - φάτνη, literally a place for eating.

The bread of life.

The Christ child: The bread of life.

Appearing out of nowhere, like manna from heaven.

And on Christmas Eve, maybe...maybe, it’s easy to imagine: God appearing out of nowhere.

What do you think?

I do wonder, though, about the other 364 days of the year.

What about the bread of life, that’s going to sustain you, in January? In February?

All the days ahead.

On the hard days, ahead?

On those days, Barbara Brown Taylor’s warning still rings true:

If your manna [always] has to drop straight out of heaven ... then chances are you are going to go hungry a lot.

How do we expect Jesus, the bread of life, to show up?

A few weeks ago, I wrote a sermon on Dedication Sunday about a Presbyterian Church that was having their Dedication Sunday just like we were.³

It wasn't a real church.

I just made it up.

It was a thought experiment.

Would you engage that thought experiment with me again tonight?

So, somewhere on this exact same night, at this exact same hour, there's a Presbyterian church, just like this one, filled with lots of beautiful and complicated people, just like you and me.

And that Presbyterian Church, just by coincidence, is doing the exact same thing we're going to be doing in just a minute: Communion at the Table.

They're going to come forward, and pick up the bread.

They're going to hear, "The bread of life for you."

And it turns out, they come to the Table with the same set complicated expectations and questions about God, that you and I do:

There's a woman in that church named Kate; she has twins who are teenagers.

They're just as busy as all get out.

Kate doesn't know if she's coming or going most days.

Anybody know what that's like?

Sometimes its work; sometimes ball practice.

One of the girls was actually in the church Christmas play.

Kate feels more like chauffeur than mom, and, sometimes, more like 'mom' than, well, Kate.

She gives and she gives, especially during Christmas.

It's been a lot.

But Kate made to the service, even got the kids here.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/live/eMpc8SHgo4M?si=HPDNAmHnYyrotbut&t=2324>

And, when it's her turn, Kate joins the line, and she picks up the bread.

And the server says, 'This is the bread of life for you.'

And, unexpectedly, the taste of it...takes Kate back, to the day the twins were Baptized.

Cause they had communion then too.

And that day, she remembers, the church said:

 'We are going to support you.

 We are going to love on your family.

 In good days and the hard days.'

And Kate looks around. And sees she's still surrounded by those people. *The bread of life for you.*

Right behind Kate in the communion line is Drew. Drew is old. And here's here again without his wife Gail. He's been here without Gail, the love of his life, for three Christmas Eves now.

And every time, he can't help but remember what it was like to be there together, on Christmas Eve.

And, in that line, he's wondering, why he's there.

I mean, sure, the kids invited him to their place, but at Drew's age, it's not so easy to get over to them.

But, then again, it's also not so easy to be here, either.

In a communion line, on Christmas eve, by himself.

And the server says, 'Here Drew.'

 Because he knows Drew.

 Known him for years.

He says: "This is the bread of life for you."

And the taste of that bread reminds Drew, well, of the funeral.

And the church saying:

 We are here for you.

 We here for you.

 We will be here for you.

 And look, here they are: Still here. With him.

The is the bread of life for you.

And then, at the very back of the line, is Keaton. She's a high school senior, grew up in the church. It was only 5 years ago, that she dressed up like a middle school angel for the family service.

She's heard the story a million times. Lately, she's been hearing it differently. It's not hitting the same way.

I mean really? Come on: Virgin birth? The heavenly host, really?

You know, when you grow up, sometimes...

it's just a bit, hard to swallow.

And she doesn't know what that pastor was droning on all about in his sermon. Some Greek words or something.

Keaton is thinking, when she finally gets out on her own, maybe, she won't come back here.

But she's here now, and she takes the bread.

"This is the bread of life for you."

And the taste...it tastes...like home.

Like memories of friends she's met here.

And adults, who listen to her ask whatever questions she wants.

And voice, whatever doubts are on her mind.

No judgment.

Thank God, it's that type of church.

In fact, many of the people who have heard her rail against God and Christians, and the baloney of it all, are here. And when Keaton catches their eyes, they smile, happy to see her.

This is the bread of life for you.

A man comes forward who's never been to church before.

The server says, "This is the bread of life for you."

Right beside him, is a woman with perfect attendance this year, every Sunday.

The server says the same thing:

“This is the bread of life for you.”

There’s bread for everyone.

The bread of life for us all.

Maybe this is what the story was always about:

A shepherd comes in, saying an angel told him to come.

And the server says,

“Sure, buddy. Whatever. This is the bread of life for you.”

Magi trapse by, saying they have followed a star.

The server thinks, that’s not how stars work, but what she says, instead is:

“This is the bread of life for you.”

And you come forward, And you. And you.

And the server says,

“This is the bread of life for you.”

“This is the bread of life for you.”

And no, that bread at our table didn’t just drop out of heaven.

Someone spent a lot of time, in the church kitchen, cutting up those gluten free loaves, so everyone could have a piece.

But it is a miracle.

Because it’s the body of Christ.

It’s the bread of life.

It’s a community of faith, gathered by the story of a savior.

It is bread to sustain us for the days to come.

Bread to sustain us for *all* the days to come. Amen.