

Christmas Communion

Tell me one more time before we move from this season. What is the meaning of Bethlehem?

House of bread.

Bread. Sustenance of life. Common, nourishing. Giving strength for bodies to grow and function; work hard and dance and play when work is done.

Giving strength to the spirit, to do the things spirits do; grieve and grow, seek the truth and soar before the dawn. Bread.

There is bread for you. It's here at this table and even now it is rising.

There is bread for you.

It is among us – our very lives the ingredients are in the loaf of deliverance.

There is bread in the wilderness

bread kneaded, punched down and rising again - bread

Bethlehem its home.

The loaf we will share today is fragrant, with the aromas of life, carried by a holy wind to our waiting nostrils

and as we inhale that mouth-watering fragrance

we know it comes from the Baker of the world

the One who measured with a generous hand, and poured and stirred and kneaded and then waited.....and then, this universe was done.

What kind of loaf is this? What IS this bread, from Bethlehem which awaits us right now?

Let the fragrance of the scriptures tell us what we need to know. Let's return first to Mary's song. It's one of my all-time favourite pieces of scripture and it has much to tell us about the bread that we're about to consume.

Do you have, in your own family traditions, certain foods that take you back in time – to your own childhood, perhaps, or even beyond?

I had a conversation this past week – someone saying a certain kind of Christmas baking so reminded them of their grandmother that they made it early the year she died just to feel closer to her. Do you have things like that?

The bread we eat at this table has power like that. To link us in a real and sensual way to people and events in the past. For me, it's tea biscuits. My dad made them all the time. The year after he died, my sister and I decided to make biscuits on his birthday, and we phoned our brother. What are you doing we said. “making biscuits” Bill said. It's powerful. When we make the biscuits, he's THERE.

Boundaries of time and death dissolve. This bread is like that – and more.

Mary's song sings of the bread of God in a way that brings the past to life in a glorious way. The song she sings is based on Hannah's song from Hebrew scripture. Hannah, an older, barren woman, prays for a child and becomes pregnant. Her son would be _____? The song she sings at that time is the one on which Mary bases her own.

This is not an unfamiliar theme in the Bible – an older woman, unable to conceive, finally becomes pregnant. Name some others?

And...following that theme in the New Testament, who is it who should have sung the song in this story?

ELIZABETH. Elizabeth fits the profile, as they say on cop shows.

An old theme....a familiar song...like eating your grandmother's tea biscuits. But here, the words are in the mouth of a young girl...and the past is brought to life with a twist. Here – she seems to say – God is doing the old, old things in a new way. We're part of the sweep of the Lord of Hosts through history –

but God at Bethlehem, the bread takes on a new flavour. What extra spice is that? It makes us alert....waiting for what will come next.

I like how Mary's song seems to build – she begins with wonder that SHE should be chosen by God for this amazing thing, and ends up realizing – THIS is what was promised of old all those years ago – THIS is what's happening! (read last verses)

So....Bethlehem bread is bread from the past. It links us in ways that are beyond logic, to the mighty deeds of God in history. Brings it alive, and we know that at this table with us are Mary herself, Hannah too, and the others, as well as those from our own past. They're here – the membranes between past and present, life and death, are stretched very thin here. The light from the star blurs the edges. They're here.

Mary tells us too something else about this loaf. It has to do with crusts and crumbs.

Listen to this: (read the mighty/low verses)

for too long some in this world have thought of themselves as....wait for it....the upper crust.

And others have had to eat the crumbs. Too long.

The day is coming, Mary says; the day is coming when that will be no more.

Those who are the upper crust will tumble.

God will “scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts” (isn't that a great line???)

The idea that some are better than others is our imagination. Someone DECIDED that white is better than black; right is better than left, thin is better than fat, male is better than female, It's a construct.

Someone made it up!

It does not have to be this way. We don't have to buy the plan. We can change it – it's not ordained or natural or unchangeable. It's in the imagination. A carefully constructed system. It's like a house of cards though – built on nothing and one day God is going to scatter that house to bits – and THEN we'll see who eats crumbs. God will scatter that house of cards.... And in the mean time we could give it a few good whacks ourselves.

And God will replace that fragile, pathetic house of cards with a new house. God already has.

Bethlehem. House of Bread.

David wanted to build God a house – remember that time? David said, after he was king and living in a palace “here I am in a beautiful palace and God dwells in the ark...I'll build God a house” and God said – remember? “No – actually – I'm a travelling, wandering go-with-my-people kind of god but I'll tell you what – I'll make YOU a house.” And God establishes a dynasty, a succession of people called to serve God. That's the house that God wants and needs.

Not a house of cedar; not a house made of ideas designed to privilege some and oppress others

but a house of people ready to receive God, welcome God into the most humble places. Bethlehem.

House of Bread. And Mary sings of the God who will bake it into being.

As you come to the table today, eat the bread and feel the mystery. Mixed into the dough is starlight, to guide you; keep you following and keep you shining.

Savour the taste of justice

inhale the fragrance of the past made alive and new

see the sparkle of the starlight

offer yourself as your own Bethlehem; a house, in which the bread of life can rise and feed the world.

Amen.