

“Food for Thought”

Stephanie Wing, 8.16.09

I recently saw a card with an old black and white picture of two women in horn-rimmed glasses talking to each other. A caption underneath had one woman saying to the other, "A virgin birth I can believe, but finding three wise men?" Our Old Testament reading gives us one wise man - Solomon. Wise King Solomon... Solomon was so wise that there is a whole book found in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles called "Wisdom of Solomon." The wise and clever sayings in the book of Proverbs were also traditionally attributed to him.

Solomon was not just wise; he was also successful. He built the Temple in Jerusalem, a privilege that had been denied his father, the great King David. He also amassed great wealth, rebuilt cities, and ruled over Israel in its most peaceful period in history. Even his name comes from the Hebrew word for peace, "Shalom." So great was Solomon's reputation that the Queen of Sheba came to visit, and threw every riddle in the book his way, but she eventually had to concede that not only were the rumors true, but that Solomon's "wisdom and prosperity far surpassed" the reports she had been given.

On the other hand, Solomon was reported to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines. How wise does that sound? He clearly didn't learn the lesson from his parents, David and Bathsheba, about the costs of extra-marital affairs or the tensions caused by rival wives and children. And after all of the successes in his

reign, after his death, the Kingdom was divided, as the 10 Northern tribes seceded, forming the Northern Kingdom of Israel and leaving the Southern Kingdom of Judah. So much for that wise man.

Solomon could have asked God for anything. And God was ready to give it. But he asked for wisdom. Have you ever thought, if you could have any superhero power at all, what it would be? I have. Forget superhuman strength, the ability to fly or see through things, or the ability to become invisible. I want knowledge. When I am trying to decide what to do, I want to know the proper course of action. I want to know what people are thinking. I want to know what the future holds. Even though I often think I do, I actually want to know what is best.

Maybe you would choose something else, but I think that once you get past our biological needs, the desire for knowledge is one of our most basic human drives. In the Garden of Eden, it was the desire to be like God, to know good and evil, that led Eve and Adam to eat from the forbidden tree. When King Saul was facing a battle against the Philistines, he wanted to know what would happen. He heard nothing from the Lord, or from prophets, and so he went to a medium in Endor and asked her to bring up Samuel from the grave to answer his questions. The following day Saul and his sons were killed in battle.

The desire for knowledge can be very strong, and the quest to go beyond the bounds of our knowledge can lead us into some trouble, according to the Bible and many in the church. About five hundred years ago, one clever parishioner asked

Martin Luther, "What was God doing before he created heaven and earth?"

Luther's response was, "Building hell for the curious!" Like Luther, Calvin thought there were some things about which we need not speculate. Mysteries of God's providence, the specifics of God's election and salvation, and even the nature of heaven and hell were all subjects that Calvin thought were left mysteries to us in Scripture, and best left that way. In Scripture we are given any revelation that is necessary for understanding God's grace, our response, and all matters of salvation. Beyond that, the mysteries of God are just that - mysterious, and beyond our incredibly limited comprehension.

But still, we want to know. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. Not knowing means giving up control in our lives, and that is hard to do. Not knowing means sleepless nights when we are looking for a job and struggling without a paycheck. Not knowing means countless stress-filled hours waiting for test results or news from the doctor's office. Not knowing can bring anxiety, frustration, anger, helplessness, and hopelessness all bubbling up to the top.

We want to know and we want to understand. We want to understand why things are happening that are beyond our control. We want to understand more about how God is acting in the world. We want to understand who this person Jesus was, and what following Jesus means for our lives. That's part of what our passage from John is about.

For weeks now (at least in the Lectionary time cycle), Jesus has been talking about bread, and he keeps talking, keeps explaining, because the people still don't get it. It is easy for us to think that the crowd has come to Jesus in order to be fed, but that is only half of the story. In reality, they are looking for something more. They want wisdom. Many people gathered to hear what Jesus had to say. They sought him out, traveled long distances, and ignored their own temporary needs in order to hear his message. But there are two types of wisdom being sought. One is the kind of wisdom that leads to belief and faith – learning at the feet of the beloved teacher. The other kind is similar to the wisdom sought by Eve and Adam or by King Saul. It is a desire to have the God's-eye view, to become like God in power and knowledge.

Jesus feeds the crowd in order to lead them to belief, to bless them abundantly through eternal life. But some don't want to be fed. They don't want simply to believe. They want to move beyond the need for being fed, to have the power and knowledge to feed themselves. Jesus says, "Believe in me, and you will have eternal life." But they don't really want to believe. They want to know how to do it themselves, how they can secure these kinds of blessings.

Of course we aren't that different, are we? We want to be in control. We want to be able to secure everything we need, to meet our own needs through the work of our lives. But of course that isn't always possible. It's hard for us to admit that we aren't in control. It's scary.

Into this fear, Jesus speaks: “believe in me.” But sometimes it is hard to believe. It is hard to understand. We don’t have the God’s eye view of things, and we still live with the unknown. We still want to gather the manna that we think will sustain us, but Jesus redirects our attention to the true bread of life. But sometimes it is still hard to believe.

But even when we struggle in our belief, Jesus continues to give himself to us, to offer the kind of lifeblood and sustenance that only God can provide. In our reading this morning, Jesus moves from talking about believing in him to *eating* him, and drinking his blood. Jesus has been talking about eating a little bit, but this is a drastic difference. The words themselves change. Jesus has been talking about eating and drinking, but in our passage today the verbs change from eating to devouring, from drinking to gulping. It is the language of hunger and thirst so deep that survival itself is at stake. This is messy eating. And our lives are messy. Jesus invites us to come, as messy as we are, and to be filled with new life. And even in those times when our own understanding fails us, and when belief seems beyond reach, we can simply come and eat.

In Hebrews we read that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. God calls us to faith, but also gives us signs and guideposts for the journey. Just as Jesus fed the crowds to give them signs, in order that they might see and believe in him, we have signs in order that we can be assured of abundant life in Christ. We have Scripture as a testimony to the grace

we have through Jesus Christ. We have the community of faith to support us in that journey and encourage us in belief. And we also have the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, two outward signs of the inward grace that God works in our lives.

The Lord's Supper brings us together as the body of Christ. It unites us around the table and reminds us that we all belong to God. We don't come to this table as perfect Christians. We come broken and hungry. Sometimes we are filled with doubts and questions. Jesus invites us to this table simply to receive the sustenance and life that he gives. Jesus gives himself to us fully, body and blood, and as we eat and drink, we are filled by Christ.

Whatever is going on in your life, Jesus knows. If all is going well, or if your world seems to be falling apart, remember that you are not alone. Jesus has prepared a table for all of us to share, and here at the table, we are invited to come and be sustained, for our hearts to be satisfied. Where there is emptiness, God can fill it. Where there are questions, rest knowing that we don't have to have all of the answers, but that God promises we will have all we need. Come and eat. Chomp and gulp. And be satisfied by God's self-giving in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.