

For the many summers I worked in outdoor ministry and the last several years when I have volunteered during the last week of camp, I have always experienced this sudden shift in perspective as soon as summer camp is over where—even though it's still early August—I immediately feel as though it should be fall. I am eager for the start of the school year and ready to move on to the next thing. But the stifling heat this past week, which sucked all the energy out of me and my furry housemates, as well as our lectionary readings, which still have us cycling through the generations of the Davidic monarchy and gnawing through John's bread of life discourse, have forced me to slow down and pace myself. After all, the spiritual life is not a destination, it's a journey; and that journey is not a sprint, it's a marathon.

In the Old Testament we have made our way from Israel's demand for a king, through the rise and demise of King Saul, and through the successes and failures of King David. That David slept with his ancestors means that instead of dying in battle, he died peacefully of old age. David had many sons by several wives, and the part the lectionary skips narrates palace intrigue, alliances, and murder following David's death, but in the end it is Solomon who succeeds him. Today we read the high point of Solomon's history: the Lord invites him to ask for a gift, and Solomon asks not for long life, riches, or to prevail against his enemies but for wisdom and discernment to govern the people. The Lord is so impressed by Solomon's altruistic answer that he is granted not only the wisdom he asks for but also all the riches and honor that he did not ask for. Either that, or God gives him wisdom plus riches and power to prove that just because a person is wise they won't necessarily use their gifts for good. Solomon becomes the living fulfillment of God's warning that a king in Israel would exploit the people just like the kings of any other nation. Most of the rest of Solomon's story is an account of how much money he received in taxes and tribute, how many resources his household consumed, how many wives he married, how many Israelites he conscripted into forced labor, how extravagantly he decorated the temple, and how many altars he built to worship foreign gods. Solomon, with all the Lord's blessings, proves that knowing right from wrong is different than choosing right over wrong. Even when we have everything going for us, all the help that God can possibly give, our natural inclination is still to wander off in another direction.

Maybe Solomon thought that since he had received wisdom from the Lord that one time he was all set forever, that he didn't need to wake up every day and still ask the Lord for guidance—and wait to hear the answer. There does seem to be something special about Solomon's particular gift of wisdom; the people see him judge disputes and perceive that he is speaking and acting with God's authority. But of course all of us have access to the Wisdom

and Word of the Lord; we know what God commands us to do. Yet we don't just read the 10 Commandments in Sunday school once then never sin again. We know right from wrong because God taught us right from wrong, but struggling to do it, to follow God's way is a life-long endeavor. Solomon's blessings are conditional on his walking in the Lord's ways. But he seems to have consulted the map just once and then trusted his own (faulty) memory. Somehow I just don't believe he checked in with the Lord before each of his seven hundred marriages. Sure enough, the Lord punishes Solomon for running after other gods, and the kingdom is divided.

When we turn then to the gospel, we find the people questioning Jesus, who is offering himself as bread for the life of the world. After 2000 years of Eucharistic language, theology, and practice, regularly reading John's gospel, and singing hymns exalting Jesus as the living bread from heaven, we may read this passage and find nothing at all strange about what Jesus says. But if we can imagine being among the very first people to hear Jesus speak this way, even to be among the early Christians hearing John's gospel for the first time, if we were to listen with fresh ears we, too, would (or should) find Jesus' endorsement of what sounds like cannibalism as confusing and disturbing as the Judeans who ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus says "body and blood" and we immediately hear "communion." But there's more going on here.

Jesus presents himself as the bread from heaven and, elsewhere, the living water—those basic, elemental things which are necessary to sustain life. We can't eat one meal or take one drink of water and survive let alone thrive for very long. Jesus talks about eating and drinking as *abiding* in him—staying with him, remaining with him, living with him, sticking with him. If we think of idioms like, *something to really sink your teeth into* or *chew on that for awhile*, we have the sense of what Jesus is inviting us to do. In Jesus, the living God becomes present to dwell in, with, and among us. *I'm here!* God says to us. *Keep hanging in here with me.* And God continues to give us God's own self, to listen to, to talk to, to argue and to wrestle with, to chew on, to go back to again and again in the same way we go to the kitchen table to eat and drink when we're hungry and thirsty. This ongoing relationship that Jesus describes as our eating and drinking his flesh and blood is what gives us eternal life—because we are living by the sustenance of the One who is Eternal.

If Solomon, to whom God spoke directly and to whom God specifically gives God's own wisdom, could still mismanage God's gifts, wander from God's ways, and choose foolishness, what hope do we have? We hope in the One who gives us himself, flesh and blood, food and drink, vital nourishment, not once but continually, without stopping until our journey is over.