

Sermon Title

Hungry in the Wilderness: Christ the Bread of Life

(John 6:29–35; Exodus 16)

May I speak in the name of the Father Son and the Holy Spirit Amen

Most of us know what hunger feels like.

Perhaps it is not real starvation, but that familiar feeling when you are waiting or have missed a meal. At first, it is easy to ignore. You keep busy. You distract yourself. But eventually hunger begins to speak. It interrupts your thoughts. It weakens your concentration. It reminds you that you are not self-sufficient after all. You need something outside yourself to live.

And the strange thing is this: we usually do not resent hunger for long. We listen to it. We let it guide us toward food.

But spiritual hunger is different.

We often ignore it, numb it, distract it, or try to feed it with lesser things. We fill our schedules, our screens, our ambitions, even our religion, while something deeper continues to ache within us.

And Scripture is remarkably honest about this ache.

The Bible does not pretend that we are self-sufficient people with occasional spiritual interests. It tells us something much more searching and much more hopeful:

we are hungry people.

And that hunger is not an accident; it is a guide.

It leads us toward Christ.

For only Christ can awaken our hearts and increase our appetite for his word. So, we come before him again and again, not pretending self-sufficiency but asking for mercy. We ask him to perform a work within us that we cannot produce ourselves, to create hunger where there is dullness and to feed us by his grace.

And we allow the hardships of our days to teach us dependence, reminding us that we were never meant to live apart from him.

So where do we go from here? We learn to embrace our hunger, letting it drive us to the only source of fullness, our true bread. We learn to see suffering, of whatever form or degree, as a strangely wrapped gift to be received from God's hand, a reminder to us of reality: we are hungry for him.

This may seem obvious, but it's hard for us to accept. Why? We don't like to be needy. And it doesn't feel natural to embrace anything that exposes our need.

Neediness is evidence of our weakness, vulnerability, and discomfort. It is proof that we can't supply everything for ourselves, it is there, gnawing at our pride and reminding us we aren't home yet.

We are in the wilderness. And we are hungry.

One of the most comforting things about the Bible is that it tells the truth. Scripture does not pretend life is easy or that faith comes naturally. It meets us where we really live. If you feel weary from the struggle of daily life, Scripture understands. If you find that even your desire for God comes and goes, Scripture understands that too. The Bible tells the story of people who hunger for God and yet struggle to trust him fully, people very much like us.

The Bible tells a story as old as Eden and as present as our own hearts: we were made to feast with God, we wandered into famine, and ever since we have searched for fullness in places that cannot satisfy. We are in the wilderness, indeed.

But here's the good news: God's word is for the wilderness, for those not yet home.

It is for you and for me. It is for the hungry. Every burden we carry, whether sudden suffering or the slow heaviness of ordinary struggle, can become a pathway leading us toward Jesus

In our Old Testament reading in Exodus, God's people had just seen a body of water divide at Moses's command, creating an escape route through the Red Sea. They had hurried through safely on foot, and not one life was lost, that is, until the waves came crashing down on their pursuers.

This was a miraculous salvation. An undeserved deliverance from death.

As they entered the wilderness they had food on their minds, the whole congregation of Israel grumbled against Moses and his brother Aaron. How could they, we wonder?

Yet we too can forget.

We have seen God deliver our souls from starving hunger. We were on the brink of spiritual death, oppressed by sin and selfishness and enslaved by worldly desires.

But when hardship comes to us such as an unexpected health crisis, the death of a family member, extended strain from job loss, the darkness of depression, daily disappointments, the brokenness of everything, we maybe more like the Israelites than we'd like to admit.

We're forgetful, turning from God and his word.

We ask:

Will he come through?

Does he really care for me?

Is he everything he says he is?

Is his word really that trustworthy? I know I have had moments like this!

In the wilderness of our own lives, we can begin to bargain with happiness. Yet while easier circumstances may bring relief, they do not guarantee peace. An easier life is not the same as a satisfied soul. The wilderness exposes our need for the word.

Often, God uses our hunger to reveal more of his perfect ability to fill it. And often God fills us with himself even when we don't intend to be satisfied with him. He keeps giving us his word even when we grumble. In Exodus 16, the word grumble is used multiple times. The people grumble against Moses and Aaron, which is ultimately a grumbling against the Lord.

And how does the Lord respond to their complaining?

God responds with grace. He gives the people what they do not deserve, passing over their grumbling and providing them with daily bread.

This is striking. In our daily struggle to hunger, God gives us himself through the daily manna of our Bibles, through an encounter with his Son brought about graciously by his Spirit.

We grumble. God gives.

This is who he is for us in the wilderness, friends.

We may wonder if our appetite for God and his words has grown at all over the years; we will struggle with discouragement and failure, even as we pursue such growth; we may be plunged into a depth of suffering that makes us question whether God's promises are true, if he is really for us after all; we may be tempted to turn from him to lesser things.

But he doesn't turn from us.

We walk through the wilderness with him alongside us, as he beckons us to take up his word, trust his work, and embrace his heart.

And this leads us to today's Gospel.

Bread was the ultimate staple of the ancient world; it was common, essential, and sustaining. By using this metaphor, Jesus makes himself accessible to everyone.

The crowds ask Jesus what they must do.

And Jesus answers:

"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

The work of God is to believe.

At first, that may sound too simple to be called work. But anyone who has walked with God for long knows otherwise.

For believing is not a moment alone; it is the work of a lifetime. Learning to trust God more deeply, to cling to Christ more faithfully, and to rest in his promises more fully.

Until, in the words of Scripture, faith becomes "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

None of us have arrived there completely.

But we are learning. We are growing. And we are on the way.

And what is this bread that Jesus wants to give them and us?

The answer is found in the last verse of this gospel reading, the key verse in this entire chapter.

Because it turns out that this bread is not something that Jesus gives.

It is who Jesus is.

Jesus himself is the bread of life, the bread of heaven.

And whoever comes to him will never be hungry again, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty again.

There is no other bread that satisfies.

Nothing else that fills the God-sized vacuum within us.

Nothing else which can feed our hungry souls.

Everything else is perishable.

It is Jesus alone that endures.

It is Jesus, and Jesus alone.

It is the work of a lifetime to come to believe this more and more. But there is no other work that is more important.

Believing that Jesus is the bread of life is the very work of God and feeds us like nothing else can.

And today we are blessed to be reminded of this truth.

Not only to hear it proclaimed, but to come forward and receive this sacrament of Holy Communion, the body and blood of Jesus himself, which also keeps us connected to this truth.

For Jesus does not merely give bread.

He gives himself.

And this table reminds us, again and again, that there is no other meal on this earth which can feed our soul.

Jesus alone is our bread of life.

Whoever comes to him will never hunger, and whoever believes in him will never thirst.

Thanks be to God.

Amen