

“A Fragment of Bread in a Fragmented World”
John 6:22-34 (Psalm 51)

Introduction

I am delighted to have an opportunity to thank you, in person, from your own pulpit here at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church. This spring, when my son was alone in a distant country and suffered a collapsed lung, you prayed for him and for our family—through all the weeks of his ordeal. There’s nothing more that a parent could ask for.

Also, while I was at his hospital bedside, one of our parishioners at Montreat Presbyterian was hospitalized, and it was clear that this was going to be his last hospitalization. And Mary Katherine, before she had even officially begun as your pastor, went to the hospital to be with him and his family. I hadn’t asked for it; I didn’t even know she’d done it until afterward; she and I hadn’t even met yet. And when I thanked her by email from a lonely hospital in Brussels, she deflected credit and simply said she knew I would have done the same for her. That tells you pretty much everything you need to know about Mary Katherine Robinson.

Brief Summary of John 6:1-21

Jesus had crossed the Sea of Galilee, and there was a large crowd that was following him, because they’d seen what he was doing for sick people.

With all those people gathered in front of him—about 5,000 families—Jesus gave thanks, and then took five barley loaves and two fish, and miraculously, fed the whole crowd.

Somehow they ended up having *more* than enough. When they had all eaten, Jesus said to his disciples, “Gather up the fragments that are left over, so nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and the fragments of the five loaves filled up twelve baskets.

And people started saying that he was the prophet they had been waiting for. And he knew they were going to try to force him to become a king, so he went back up the mountain, by himself.

That evening, the disciples, not seeing him around, got into a boat without him—the only boat available. And they set out for Capernaum, miles away on the other side of the water. It got dark, and a strong wind came up, and the waves became rough. When they had managed to row out about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the water, and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.

And Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid.”

Today’s scripture reading continues from John 6:22.

John 6:22-34

²²The next day, the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.

²³Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

²⁴When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?”

²⁶Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you [the Common English Bible translates it, “I assure you”], you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?”

²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

³⁰So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

³²Then Jesus said to them, “[I assure you], it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

The Sermon

Some of you will remember an English actor named David Niven, who had a long career in films, and who also wrote a fantastic memoir.

He talked about his days as a junior officer in the British army in the 1930s. There was an episode where his battalion had been evacuated from the Mediterranean to a more or less deserted barracks in England, and since there was absolutely nothing to do, the senior officer sent pretty much everybody home on leave, except for a skeleton crew to be headed by two officers, David Niven and another, who slightly outranked him, named Trubshawe.

There being nothing to do, no pressing matters, and no higher ranking officers around, they didn't bother to look around and familiarize themselves with the fortress; they just lounged around in their boredom, and waited for nothing in particular.

So it was a surprise one day, as it was supposed to be, when a Major General and his staff showed up for a surprise inspection. Niven talks about how they rushed to get themselves put together and kind of fumbled their way through a totally uninformed tour of the grounds, and finally, as the major general and his staff were heading back to their car, Niven and the others felt pretty good about how well they had pulled off the ruse of acting like they had been looking after the place that they were responsible for.

At the last second, the general noticed a building with big red doors and a sign that said “Firehouse,” and said to Niven's superior officer, Trubshawe, “What's in there?”

Well, by now, they were all perfectly confident, so Trubshawe said, “Why, the fire engine, sir!”

And the general said, “Get it out.”

And Trubshawe, being a good officer, said, “Yes, sir! Niven, get the firetruck out!”

David Niven said he privately shot him a nasty look and said, “Very good sir!” and turned to the next officer below him and said, “Sergeant, get the engine out!”

Over about the next minute, everyone who got the order saluted it and then passed it on to the next person down the line—all of them in a voice of absolute but totally baseless confidence, none of them having ever even noticed that there was a firehouse in the fort.

Somebody was dispatched to go find the key to the firehouse, wherever that was; and so while they were waiting for it, the general asked Officer Trubshawe, “What sort of engine is it?” Obviously, the whole battalion would know this, since it was their solemn duty to have been looking after it all this time.

And Trubshawe, inventing every word, said, “Oh, it’s beautiful; it’s made by Merryweather & Company and it has a lot of brasswork and coils and coils of hose.”

Finally the key arrived, and the whole party went over to the firehouse, to the big red double doors. Key inserted, and, in David Niven’s words, “with the flourish of a guide at Hampton Court opening the door of Henry VIII’s bedchamber, Trubshawe pushed open the double doors.”

And there, in the firehouse, were two bicycles and a dead Christmas tree.ⁱ

I would love to have some insight into what was going on in each soldier’s mind during that episode, where one of the most powerful officers in the British army—somebody who could destroy your life, pretty much—was standing there, ready to pass judgement, waiting to see how well they had maintained the shiny red fire engine—which, it turned out, didn’t even exist.

As one soldier passed the order down to the next, they didn’t necessarily know there *wasn’t* going to be a big, beautiful fire engine behind the door.

But when the door rolls open and there's nothing but a dried up Christmas tree where there's supposed to be a gleaming, beautiful, larger-than-life machine, we kind of learn to shrug our shoulders and go, "You know, I figured it wasn't going to be there."

My concern is that for many people, their relationship with God can be the same way.

Deluded into believing that the deal was supposed to be that if you went to church, and volunteered some, and tried to be a generally decent person, bad things wouldn't happen to you, when tough times *do* come, it hurts enough to make them think that maybe God is like the big firetruck that was never going to be behind those doors when we finally opened up the door.

I've been preaching for a long time, but it's been a relatively short time since, in a barrage of several unrelated events, Vivian and I went through protracted experiences

of daily, constant dread for our family's safety;

of soul-crippling anger, re-fueled by repeated frustrations;

of concern that despair seemed to be circling several of our loved ones like a hawk, ready to pounce in the blink of an eye;

and of a hope so far-fetched—the hope that God would send me to Montreat Presbyterian Church—that I had to keep reminding myself that only if it were God's will did it have even the slightest chance of coming to pass: if I *didn't* keep reminding myself of that, I was worried that, like Icarus, my fantastical hopes would melt from flying too close to the sun and send me crashing to the ground.

With God's help, and with the love of friends and family, we made it safely through that two year patch, after which we kind of looked at each other and said, "That was exciting! Let's never do that again."

But it is not just certain, private things that make people like you and me anxious.

We live in an anxious time.

Earlier this summer, in the words of J Kameron Carter of the Duke Divinity School, “A drone went into a church in Charleston, South Carolina, and attempted to kill that which cannot be killed.”ⁱⁱ

But in a horrifying tragedy, good people, Black people, were brutally, cruelly taken from us by a white terrorist. And a raw and tender nerve—well, a deep wound in this nation’s body—was exposed. It had already been violently agitated by Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston; you know the litany.

Our history, and therefore anything we can say about it, is fraught with tensions: some obvious, and some buried like landmines. We have been reminded that we are a nervous people. And fragmented. And, whether it be over the macro issues of our time and place, or the micro issues that happen in every family, we are anxious.

This is not even to mention, of course, that the body of Christ, particularly our expression of it—what used to be called the mainline church—has its own consumer-oriented anxieties as well. Fewer people in the pews; less money; a media that has precious little idea what it’s talking about whenever it presents any story about belief, religion, God, or the Church, but boy do they know how to craft a controversial headline.

And once again the blood pressure goes up all over the denomination.

What makes you anxious?

Do you believe that God has power, even over those things that make you anxious?

Yesterday, he fed 5,000 families on five barley loaves—the cheap stuff; it’s like government cheese—and two fish. And we all ate and had plenty, so much so that we left all these fragments of bread lying around.

It wasn’t meant to be a picnic. We were there because we’d already seen that everywhere he went, this man healed people. And every single one of us loves somebody, or knows somebody, or is responsible for somebody, who is sick.

And when we can't do anything about it, and we have to stand there and watch our families and friends suffer, all kinds of anxious thoughts go through our heads.

What if this gets worse?

What if *I* end up getting sick?

How are we going to pay for this? What if I lose my job?

What's the worst case scenario here, and why does it always feel like it's also the most likely scenario?

Have I done something wrong?

What if my relationships start to fall apart?

What if I fail?

If God is so good and powerful and wise, why are we having to go through this? Is God even listening?

Is that big, beautiful, bright red firetruck even in there?

And as those thoughts started to feed off of each other in our heads and grow stronger, just as our anxious fears were ready to reach their boiling point, it was dinner time—unscheduled dinner time for 5,000 families. Even though he started with practically nothing. Plenty to eat, for all who were there—so much so that afterward, just the fragments were enough to fill a perfect number of baskets.

That was yesterday.

And then, last night, he and his disciples were on one side of the sea, and there was one boat, and his disciples all got in, and he wasn't there. And somehow, the next morning, he was in Capernaum with all the rest of them. He wasn't tired, he didn't look sleepy or famished, and he didn't have time to walk the ten or fifteen rugged miles around the whole northwest quarter of the Sea of Galilee. *Somehow* he got into that boat after they'd already rowed three or four miles across.

And the people, still in the grip of their fiercest anxieties, came to him and said, "How is this possible? It isn't possible. How is this possible?"

There was a storm on the sea, and the one who had done the miraculous feeding missed the boat, and here is, having effortlessly crossed the water without need of our little sailing contraptions.

And in the face of the astonishing claim that God can nourish and calm us in the midst of our anxiety, the insistent reality of our storms and our hunger compels us to ask, with the desperate crowd that caught up to him in Capernaum: can any of this even be real? Is the fire engine really in the firehouse?

I love the fact that only yesterday, the people had not only witnessed but been physically nourished by this miraculous bread; and *the next day*, when Jesus says, “the work is simply to believe in me,” the only response they can come up with is, “Could you give us some sort of *sign*?”

He is the physical embodiment of the fact that our Creator God loves us tangibly and has an interest in the welfare of every human being on earth.

Sometimes, it’s right in front of our faces, and we still can’t see it for what it is. Particularly in our anxieties.

Your anxieties would have you believe that the best you can ever hope for is to get by.

Your creator—the same one who created every galaxy, every star, every planet, every tree, every atom—the Almighty Creator knows you intimately and loves you dearly. That creator, whom we call God, believes that you are worth dying for.

God believes that your moments are all sacred.

And when you are angry, or afraid, or despair is hovering in the wings, or you are worried that your hopes may lift you off the ground only to drop you back down to earth,

Jesus offers you a piece of bread, climbs into the boat with you, and says, the only work I’m asking you for is to believe that life is about God, and God is about truth, and beauty.

Everything else will flow naturally from that belief—
your care for others,
your pursuit of justice and mercy,
your stewardship of resources,

your acceptance of yourself,
your courage to love the unlovable,
your strength to withstand all anxieties.

John Calvin wrote, “When the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work,” and you can trust that God’s work is for your welfare.ⁱⁱⁱ

A few years ago I exchanged emails with my friend, Phil Gladden, the excellent pastor of Wallace Presbyterian Church. At the end of a short note back to me, he had written, “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?”

I didn’t know that was part of his signature, and I thought, “I was just asking if you wanted to go to lunch.”

My hope and prayer for you is this: that in whatever makes you most anxious, you will be able to step back, and soberly consider that question:

Where is God already at work in this situation?

Sometimes it’s very hard to see. But when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, God is everywhere at work.

Yesterday I saw a Facebook post from one of my wife’s best friends, a church educator in Taiwan. It was a picture of her with her mother, strong and vital at 86, outside walking the family dog. Under the picture were some words written as characters in Taiwanese. There is also the option to click on a button that says, “translate.”

I don’t know how that translation function is supposed to work, but I don’t think it did. Under the picture of a friend’s mother out walking on a pleasant afternoon, the computer-generated translation of the caption came up with these words: “Discotheque of deep-felt gratitude and happiness can see 86 years old.”

I have no idea what the original words said in Taiwanese. But, siblings in Christ, I can say from the heart that I wish you a discotheque of deep-felt gratitude and happiness.

We don't always get that. Our anxieties, and the anxieties of an anxious age, are real. But for all the fractures of our anxious lives in this fragmented world, God gives bread and light and hope and truth.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Bid my anxious fears subside.

And God, my savior, in the name of Christ we pray:
give us this bread always.

Keith Grogg
Black Mountain Presbyterian Church
Black Mountain, NC
August 2, 2015

ⁱ David Niven, *The Moon's A Balloon*. New York: Dell, 1972; pp. 116-120.

ⁱⁱ In a presentation to the Asheville cohort of Macedonian Ministries, June 25, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.11