

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

August 23, 2015

Proper 16B/Ordinary 21B/Pentecost 13

## The readings this week:

- 1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43 ◦ Psalm 84
- Ephesians 6:10-20 ◦ John 6:56-69

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Life Outside the Lines

One Wednesday evening at a church supper I sat beside a five-year-old. The only child at the table, she turned over the decorative placemat after she'd finished eating to discover games on the back: a word find; a crossword puzzle; a maze. I hadn't worked a maze in years. Together we tried to figure out which way to draw a line through the confusing pathways so the bear could find the honey. As a child, I always found the maze the least satisfying of all the games. It usually became messy, with my pencil lines backtracked over each other. No matter how hard I tried to see ahead, the pathways were so tightly packed it was hard to tell where they led. There were so many dead ends, so many turnarounds. It wasn't neat like the other games that could be figured out in your head before writing the answers. You may have guessed by now that I'm the type of person who likes things to be orderly in my mind, on paper, in my life. You will have also guessed that I am often disappointed, because real life is messy.

In the 6th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus feeds five thousand plus, and compares this windfall to the manna the Israelites had received centuries before when they wandered the wilderness. It seems the listeners' ideas about manna had been all neatly organized and placed in a theological box, a nice straight-sided crossword where everything fits just right. Manna was God's way of looking after the people of Israel. They received the blessing every day until they finally reached the land of promise. The end, Amen.

Then Jesus has a very long monologue about bread of life, which starts out nicely but ends with the command to eat his body and drink his blood. Now that's anything but neat and orderly. It's frightening and messy. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" Obviously, the cannibalistic references didn't help, but I think they also just did not like the way he was messing with the old stories, scribbling outside the lines, making the sensible puzzle of life they'd imagined into a much more complicated maze. "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

These were not mere hangers-on who walked away. The writer calls them "disciples." They were real followers who had probably been around for a while. They'd liked the talk of Jesus, the idea of Jesus, but this messiness of Jesus was too much. "Does this offend you?" he asked. Apparently, yes.

Then Jesus turned to the twelve. The closest, most constant group. "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter's answer is my

favorite quote of his in the gospels. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

If they'd really taken the manna story to heart, they'd have remembered what a meandering story it was. If those long-ago Israelites had walked in a straight line to the holy land it might've taken them a few weeks. But they struggled with each other, fought with their leaders, didn't like God anymore, couldn't agree on anything. And they wandered in a very messy way for a generation.

The followers of Jesus, at their best times, have understood that life does not travel in straight lines. It throws us curves of one kind or another all the time. No matter how hard we try to make things straighten out, we don't have that kind of power. Cancer. A broken relationship. A sick child. An accident. A job loss. Conflict. An international financial crisis. An abusive spouse. Bad news. Bad memories. A death. These are not straight line problems. They are a maze.

The words of eternal life aren't just the ones that fit on a desk plaque or that get tossed into political campaigns. They are not always simple, cute, easy to hear. The words of eternal life remind us that life is not always plain; solutions to our problems are not straightforward.

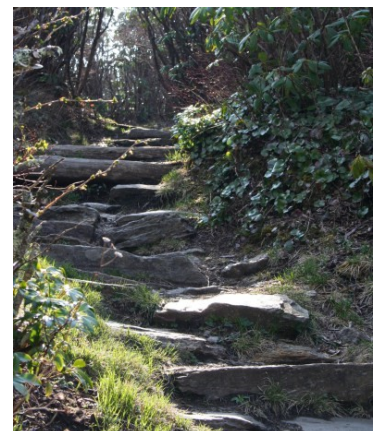
It is exactly because the words of eternal life ring true that we cannot leave. Where would we go? Who else will tell us the truth about life? Who else has lived the truth about life so fully?

John's gospel begins with: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For Christians, there is something about the Word that we cannot seem to find anywhere else. The gospel words of eternal life go straight to the soul. The words don't straighten the maze, really. But when we are winding our way around it, retracing our steps, losing our way at times, stumbling around outside the lines, we try not to feel utterly lost.

We are often on a winding and convoluted path, confusing, frightening, difficult, maze-like. But we have come to believe that somewhere on the path, truth can be heard.

So we stay and listen.

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# Reflecting on the Word



## 1st Reading: 1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43

Who supports moving the ark from the city of David into the Temple? Describe the ceremony that preceded the ark as it was transferred from the city of David into the Temple (Compare to 2 Samuel 6). What does the cloud represent in verse 11? Where have we already seen this cloud in Scripture? Is it possible that the cloud demonstrates divine approval of Solomon's Temple? What does Solomon ask God to do for the foreigners? According to this prayer, what is the purpose of the temple? Solomon calls on God to hear from heaven the prayers of his people. Do we believe God hears our prayers (all of them)? Do we take all of our requests and concerns to God? When the land is dry, do we pray for rain? How can Solomon's prayer guide how we pray?

*The Church at Brook Hills*

## Psalm Reading: Psalm 84

Think back to where you were living when you were twelve years old. What was the center of warmth in your home then? What is the psalmist yearning for? What names and metaphors for God can you find in this psalm? The "Valley of Baca" was an arid stretch of desert that brought tears of adversity to pilgrims who had to traverse it en route to Jerusalem. What does that valley symbolize—historically and spiritually? What are the benefits or blessings of trusting God as this psalmist does? If you could have one wish come true regarding your Christian life, what one thing would you yearn for? How do you usually address God in prayer? Why? Try to visualize where and when God has been closest to you. Put yourself in that picture as a "doorkeeper." How do you feel at those intimate times? *Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press*



## Praying Toward Sunday

Gracious God, although we once were strangers, you receive us as friends and draw us home to you. Set your living bread before us that, feasting around your table, we may be strengthened to continue the work to which your Son commissioned us. Amen.

~ *David Hazard*

## By Love We Show

A cloud came from that holy place,  
The priests there could not stand;  
The glory of the Lord replaced  
Their ministry, well-planned.

The king, God's promises retold  
To Yahweh in his prayer,  
Rememb'ring, though, no one controlled  
God's how, or when, or where.

Thus Solomon, in royal plea,  
Grace to the world declared,  
That everyone some day might see  
The news which must be shared.

O Lord, the time, we do not know,  
When peace will be at hand;  
But yours the name by love we show,  
And by your power we stand.

*Scott L. Barton*

## 3rd Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

How have you recently seen God protecting you as you face spiritual battles? Four times in verses 10-14 Paul urges his readers to stand firm in the battle against the devil's stratagems. How are we as Christians susceptible to instability? How does the "armor of God" prepare us for spiritual battle? In verses 18-20 Paul urges all kinds of prayers. How has he been a model prayer warrior throughout this letter? How do you sense a battle around you with more than physical forces and foes? Which piece of armor do you need most to fight your spiritual battles? Explain. What main obstacle do you face in fighting the battle of prayer more effectively? *Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press*

## 4th Reading: John 6:56-69

This is another passage where Jesus speaks about bread. How did he use bread as an example in this passage and how did the disciples respond? Why did Jesus ask the disciples if they wished to go away? When did you last speak these words, "Lord to whom can we go?" with a heart full of yearning and hope? How was your yearning answered? What examples do you have of people who have accompanied you on the journey, helping point the way to Jesus, the Holy One of God? What has their witness meant to you? When have you been especially grateful that this question comes from all of us, not just you yourself alone? How has the community of God's people strengthened you in those times? *Dancing with the Word*