

Bread of Life

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Sunday, March 9, 2025

“Bread of Life” | John 6:25-40 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud


Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”

This is one of several “I am” statements in the gospel according John.

Jesus also said he is the light of the world; the good shepherd; the way, the truth and the life; the vine; and the resurrection and the life.

Our sermon series theme is BREAD of LIFE, and you’ll be hearing a variety of biblical teachings on bread, through the holy season of Lent, that goes through Easter Sunday, April 20.

Jesus said:
I am the bread of life. (Jn. 6:35)
I am the light of the world. (Jn. 8:12)
I am the good shepherd. (Jn. 10:11)
I am the way, the truth, and the life. (Jn. 14:6)
I am the vine; you are the branches (Jn. 15:5)
I am the resurrection and the life. (Jn. 11:15)



Lent is a time for us to follow Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward death and then resurrection. It’s a time pray for strength to turn from sin, a time to be open to the power of God to get us back on track and renew us.

Lent is a good time to think about what nourishes us, so our emphasis on bread is good.

Today’s reading comes from John 6. Just prior to our lesson, we read about Jesus feeding 5,000 people with just five barley loaves and two fish, with 12 baskets of food leftover.

It’s worth remembering that some people understand the feeding of the 5,000 as a literal miracle, with Jesus literally multiplying the loaves and fishes, while other people see the miracle in Jesus getting people to share.

Either scenario is miraculous.

Our reading includes longer and more reflective statements from Jesus, which are common in John, with the focus on bread to feed the body and the spirit.

Listen for God's word from John 6:25-40 NRSVUE

“When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do 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.”

Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So 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? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell 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. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away, for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.””

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

Jesus knows the importance of bread and food for physical hunger. He knew that the foundational story of the Jewish people was the Exodus, where God led the people on a long journey through the wilderness, providing manna—a type of bread—every day.

Jesus saw that there were people in his day who weren't getting enough food, so he provided food, sometimes for thousands at a time. He also spoke about hunger throughout his ministry.

- In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” (Luke 6:21)
- Faced with hungry crowds, he tells his disciples, “You give them something to eat.” (Mark 6:37)
- In the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus affirms the value of providing physical nutrition, saying, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,” (Matthew 25:35)

In our world, the sad reality is that hunger remains. Too many people lack daily bread—across the planet and sometimes even across the street.

We’re aware of this reality here at Covenant, and just this year our Mission Committee is putting an emphasis on food security, focusing our mission dollars on partners who help feed hungry people. We see continued use of the food pantry out in front of the church.

When we look at the big picture, we know there is enough food for everyone, but we haven’t done a good job of sharing or of supporting sustainable socio-economic models so that all may have enough to eat. So we ask questions about systemic poverty and structural racism with the hope that all may be fed.

One reason for launching this bread-themed series is for us to be more mindful of hunger in the world and hunger in our neighborhoods and to be more appreciative of our daily bread.

So, this Lent in particular is a good time for us to consider a variety of spiritual practices relating to food: eating slowly, being grateful for the hands that prepared our food, sharing meals with other folks—especially lonely and isolated folks, learning about hunger in our community, and doing something to help feed hungry people.

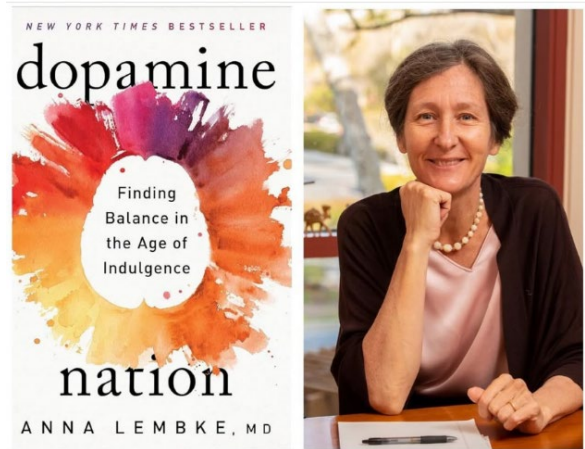
While bread for the stomach is vital, Jesus also knows that we do not live by bread alone, that we have deep hunger for meaning and purpose—for God’s word, God’s spirit, God’s love.

So, we’re invited to experience Jesus as the bread of life, the one who gives deep and satisfying spiritual nourishment—in the good news that we are beloved children of God, that our sins are forgiven, that we can live a life of meaning and purpose.

Lent is a good time to think about nourishment, about how sometimes we fill our not only our stomachs but our minds and souls with junk food, about how we lose focus and purpose.

About a month ago, I listened to an interview with Dr. Anna Lembke. She's a psychiatrist and author, and she has served as director of Stanford University's Addiction Medicine program.

The title of her NYT interview with Lulu Garcia Navarro, is "Digital Drugs Have Us Hooked." I liked what I heard, so I bought a copy of her 2021 book, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, published in 2021.



I'm about halfway through the book, which is excellent. If you want the condensed version, she has a 14 minute TED talk online.

Dr. Lembke recognizes how so many of us in affluent cultures have ended up way out of balance because of the over abundance of just about everything.

She uses the concept of "the plenty paradox," which she described in this way:

It seems to me we've crossed over some kind of abundance set point where we went beyond meeting our basic survival needs and now have so much access to so many pleasure-inducing substances and behaviors that we may actually be changing our brain chemistry such that we're in a dopamine-deficit state. Now we need to keep using these highly stimulating drugs and behaviors, not to get high and feel good, but just to level the balance and feel normal.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/01/magazine/anna-lembke-interview.html>

When you think about it, she's right about our over-abundance. We're addicted. The more we consume, the hungrier we get.

Pretty much everyone here can afford to go to a decent supermarket, where you can buy just about any food you want. Just thinking about bread, you can get hundreds of variations of bread. We're picky about our bread, and on those rare moments when the specific kind we like isn't available, we get very upset.

You can go to restaurants and fast-food places and get just about anything. Within five or ten minutes from this church you can get Italian, Mexican, Thai, Chinese, seafood, gourmet ice cream, and a wide variety of poly-syllabic coffee drinks.

And you can sit at home on your couch in your lounge pants and order that same food to be brought to your doorstep.

Remember the stories from our parents and grandparents about how special it was to get an orange in their stocking at Christmas? Now we get oranges, bananas, avocados and everything else year-round.



There is nothing wrong with a well-balanced diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and convenience is a good thing.... except for the fact that we've grown so used to having everything we blow a gasket when the strawberries aren't super fresh, or the price of eggs goes up because of avian flu.

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Technology has been a blessing in many ways, giving us new ways to connect and learn. But it has seriously accelerated our over stimulation and over-abundance, —and our corresponding anxiety and unhappiness.

With a few clicks on your devices and maybe a few dollars, you can watch any movie you want within minutes. I remember when “The Wizard of Oz” was on TV once a year, and you had to be at your TV exactly when it started.

You can watch live or previously recorded sporting events, concerts, speeches, whatever you like. And yet all too often we sit in front of our screens and say, “there’s nothing on.”

Anytime you want, you can call, text, or video chat with just about anyone in the world who also has a phone. Your neighbor across the street, or your friend who moved overseas. And yet we’re lonelier than we’ve ever been.

With the magic of search engines, you can discover any tidbit of information within seconds. Who won the World Series in 1957? How many undergraduate students are at UW Madison? Where is the country Lesotho?

With the advent of online shopping, you can purchase almost anything and have it delivered to your doorstep within days, if not hours. Clothes, books, appliances.

Again, none of those scenarios is bad in itself, except that this new reality simply feeds our ever-increasing desire for more stuff and more distraction.

The treadmill of wanting more just keeps going faster, while we are less satisfied. And without good guardrails, the ease of technology in our age of abundance can lead us astray. Too many people are caught up in online pornography, excessive gambling, conspiracy theories and dangerous misinformation, and piles of clothes we never wear and plastic junk that we never use.

In the face of all this stimulation and over-abundance, Dr. Lembke encourages us to **abstain**.

Abstaining means taking an intentional break from the thing that has too much control in our life. And from what I can tell in the book and in her interview, she says that the neuroscientists suggest that the abstinence break is most effective when it is more than four weeks, to really begin to rewire the circuitry and form newer, healthier habits.

Four weeks.... Well, isn't it interesting that Lent goes for six and a half weeks?

Maybe it's time to reconsider the ancient practice of fasting, of giving up something.

Fasting in Lent is modeled on Jesus fasting in the wilderness, where he relied on the scripture from Deuteronomy: one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

So, is there something in your life that seems to have taken up too much space or energy or focus? Something that is almost controlling you? Food, drink, screen, phone, shopping?

Fasting gives us opportunity for some space in our lives, even some hunger and discomfort, to help us be more alive, more appreciative of what we have and less anxious about what we don't.

Richard Foster wrote:

Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need — until we are enslaved by them.

<https://renovare.org/articles/the-purpose-of-fasting>

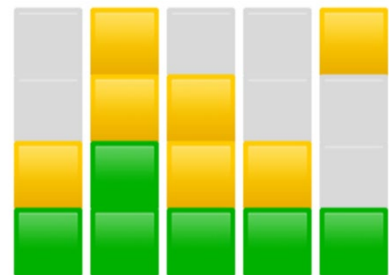
Maybe you need a partial fast, a small adjustment. Maybe you need something more drastic. That's for you to figure out.

This is not an invitation for you to look at your spouse or your kids or your neighbors and start thinking and commenting on the things that you think are controlling their lives. Everyone needs to figure this out for themselves.

Maybe, and it's a big maybe, if you've got a healthy relationship with someone, you could ask them, "Hey I'm thinking about giving up _____. Can you support me in this? And is there anything you are focusing on during Lent? Anything you are giving up?"

We all need to primarily focus on ourselves. For me, I'm focusing on screen time and how easy it is for me, even while working on a sermon about digital distraction, to get distracted by social media, by checking my email, and playing "just one" game of Free Cell. I've realized now that every time I pick up my tablet, I start thinking about winning another game of Free Cell. It's fascinating and a little bit scary how my brain is now wired for interest in that game.

One game I play every day is WORDLE, an online game where you try to guess a five-letter word. It's challenging and fun, and it's beautiful because you get one game every day. You play, you get it or you don't and you're done. It's like a built-in guardrail to keep people from getting distracted and playing 10 or 20 or 100 times.



I bring all of this up as we begin our Lenten focus on bread because too many of us are malnourished—physically, socially, and spiritually.

There is too much junk out there which is too easily available.

We need to be really intentional about what we eat, and more importantly about how we feed our souls and our minds.

Bread is so simple and wonderful, symbolic of what is really essential.

Jesus is bread of life. He wants us to be nourished in body and spirit.

We need good nourishment—now as much as ever with all the craziness in the world.

- Our democracy is under siege
- Global stability is imperiled as traditional alliances are falling apart

- Economically, things are unstable with people losing their jobs
- Racism and sexism continue, along with renewed dehumanization of LGBTQ people.

We live in a stressful time, and we need to engage with these issues, along with the normal challenges of life like declining health, family stress.

In order to even begin to deal with any of these issues, we must be healthy and strong and well nourished.

Reminding ourselves of the urgent need of good nutrition for our bodies and for our souls is kind of like the airplane announcement about putting on your seat belt before you try to help others.

We need to be healthy and strong and focused. Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel that Jesus is the bread of life. Amen.