

“The Essential Christ”

a sermon by

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Text: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and who believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:35).

One of the movies that caught my attention over the past year was the movie “Bobby,” that was produced by Emilio Estevez. The movie portrayed the life and death of Robert Kennedy, the brother of President John F. Kennedy. After his brother’s assassination, Robert Kennedy became a U.S. Senator, and in 1968 ran for President before being assassinated by a lone gunman after the Presidential Primary in California.

Robert Kennedy was dining in his home on November 22, 1963 when the head of the F.B.I., J. Edgar Hoover, phoned him and said, “I have news for you. The President has been shot.”

In the months following his brother’s death, Robert Kennedy was devoured by grief. One of his biographers wrote, “He literally shrank, until he appeared wasted and gaunt. His clothes no longer fit, especially his brother’s old clothes – an old blue topcoat, a tuxedo, and a leather World War II bombing jacket that barely hung on his narrowing frame.”

But during the following March, something happened to Bobby Kennedy that changed his life. While on vacation in Antigua, he read a book given to him by his sister-in-law, Jackie Kennedy. The book was written by a woman name Edith Hamilton and was entitled *The Greek Way*. In reading this book, Kennedy came in contact with two of the great Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Both spoke to the heart of Kennedy’s own suffering—the terrible struggle to understand the deep pain of suffering and loss.

Hamilton, at her best, describes the tragic sensibility that was part of the Greek understanding of life—the conviction that good grows out of bad, virtue grows out of hardship, and that wisdom is born in suffering. One of the passages that Kennedy memorized from Aeschylus goes like this:

“God, whose law it is that they who learn must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

David Brooks, writing in the *New York Times*, observed that the story of Robert Kennedy is the story of a person stepping out of his own time and learning from the past a strength that allowed him to live in the present. Bobby Kennedy was a figure of the 60's, but he was never really of that era. He drew his strength from somewhere else.

I.

Over the weeks of Advent we have looked at four of the famous “I am” sayings that characterize the Gospel of John. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus identifies himself as “The light of the world,” “the way, truth, and life,” “the good shepherd,” “the gate,” and “the resurrection and the life.” The Gospel of John is unique in the way that it blends these sayings with a group of discourses and signs that Jesus did as a means of organizing his gospel.

This morning we read the saying of Jesus where he identifies himself as the “bread of life.” Of course, this identification made many connections with his hearers. Some heard in this a reference to the Lord’s Supper. Still others were reminded of the wandering in the Wilderness when God provided the Israelite people with manna to feed them on their journey.

As we have seen on a number of occasions in John’s Gospel, the author of the Gospel connects the saying of Jesus to an event. In this case the saying “I am the bread of life” is connected to the feeding of the five thousand (John 6: 1-14). Jesus is not only the “bread of life.” He has the capacity to feed a multitude of hungry people. Jesus took two loaves and five fish and with them, fed a crowd of five thousand people.

II.

Christmas is the most popular national and religious festival that is observed in our culture. No other time of year commands the attention of our entire culture as the Christmas season does. And yet remarkably enough, Christmas was very late in becoming a Christian festival. The resurrection and the passion of Jesus were celebrated almost immediately by the church but the celebration of the birth of Jesus was not celebrated by the church until the Fourth century. At first, it appeared that the church really saw no need to make something special out of the birth of Christ. And yet, even as the church reflected on the life and death of Jesus, it became increasingly aware that the birth of Jesus represented something very special. The birth of Jesus was the incarnation. It was the embodiment of God in human life.

To affirm Jesus as the “bread of life” is to confirm two essential aspects of our faith.

III.

The first is our dependence on God and our confidence that God can provide us the strength we need to face the difficulties of life. John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, had a profound faith in God. To a very remarkable extent, Calvin was free of the power

of possessions. He had no wealth. He owned no property. When he died, he insisted that he be buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. To this day, no one knows where he is buried. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he writes:

“We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: insofar as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.”

Now, to be sure, we live in a very different world today than the world of the 16th Century. People today are compelled to consider issues of retirement, health care, and a host of other matters that are very real. But, at the end of the day, we would do well to understand that none of us can secure ourselves from the inevitable suffering and adversity that comes to all of us.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once told of preaching a sermon to a congregation in Inverness, Scotland during the darkest days of World War I. As that congregation gathered for worship, every person in the church knew that a great offensive battle was taking place that very morning in Germany and that the Scottish regiments were in the midst of that terrible battle. As the congregation moved through that worship service, there was a general knowledge that at that very moment young men were dying on the battlefield. Fosdick went on to say that the closest he had ever come to losing control of himself in a worship service was when that overflowing congregation sang from the Scottish Psalter until the building virtually shook:

“God is our refuge and our strength,
In straits a present aid.
Therefore, although the earth be moved
We will not be afraid.”

IV.

There is another way that Jesus comes to us as the “bread of life” in this Christmas season. Dr. John Leith once pointed out that there are two kinds of joy that one can experience during the Christmas season. The first is that the celebration of the birth of Christ is related to the sheer wonder of creation. The very fact that God can become embodied in a human life tells us that creation is good, and that a human life can be the medium of the self-expression of the divine in human history.

To be sure, there are those who worry that the celebration of Christmas will be turned into a nature festival. And yet, most of us sense that there is something fundamentally right about Christmas—even with all its excesses.

But if the joy of creation is the only joy we know, that will soon pass, for no human joy can sustain itself against the inevitable frustration, failure, and disappointments of life, to say nothing of the final fact of death. Therefore the joy of Christmas must be sustained by the more profound joy of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Reynolds Price, in his small book entitled *Letter to a Godchild: Concerning Faith*, refers to an event in his life that he has written of elsewhere. At age fifty-one he was diagnosed with an inoperable malignant tumor in his spine. He was in a great deal of pain and with very little hope of survival. During this ordeal Price experience a remarkable visionary experience. While lying in his bed at home, he suddenly saw himself transported to the shore of a large lake. Immediately, he recognized the lake as the Sea of Galilee (Kinnereth) in Northern Israel—and in a moment, a man whom Price knew to be Jesus beckoned him into the water. In this vision Jesus washed the wound on Price’s back from the failed surgery and then spoke four words: “Your sins are forgiven.” Even though Reynolds Price was nearly overwhelmed by the experience, he was able to speak the words most on his mind, “Am I also healed?” To which Jesus replied, “That too.”

Twenty years later, the experience of that vision is as real to Reynolds Price as it was on that fateful day and even though the subsequent radiation that he experienced left him a paraplegic, he is nevertheless convinced that he was granted an experience of healing.

Now, of course, this does not happen to everyone. And Reynolds Price, of all people, is sensitive to the cry of those who watch helpless human suffering and wonder where God is in the midst of it. Nonetheless, he is compelled to bear witness to a remarkable event in his life.

As we approach the Christmas season, I believe that there is little else that the church can do, except to proclaim the great mystery and wonder that is the birth of Christ. As the Apostle Paul notes in his letter to the church at Corinth, God has a remarkable way of choosing what is foolish to shame the wise, of choosing what is weak to shame the strong, of choosing what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one may boast.” (I Corinthians 1: 27-29)

At Christmas we have no choice except to proclaim our conviction that in a manger, in a stable, in a small town in the middle of nowhere, God chose to become incarnate in the birth of Jesus who we proclaim as the Christ.

There are many who would say that it is not true. But there is no one who can say it is trivial. And if it is true, it is the greatest news to come to human beings on this planet.

This is the good news that we celebrate at Christmas.

Amen!