

Malachi 5:2-5
Fourth Sunday of Advent – C (Love)
December 23, 2018

“Bread of Love”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:2)

What typically goes into your basic bread? There’s flour, water, yeast, and some sugar to help activate the yeast. I remember when my mom made bread ... it took forever. Mixing, kneading, raising, kneading some more, raising some more ... eventually ... baking. And that took a lot of time. If you wanted bread ... good bread ... be prepared to wait. Fresh, homemade bread is special. I think it’s because the time involved to make it is an indication of a hidden ingredient ... love. This special ingredient ... love ... needed to prepare fresh, homemade bread makes it so good!

Advent ... a time of preparation. It can feel lengthy ... but you see progress leading to that festive day we’ll soon celebrate. The candles along the center aisle have been lit up. The Advent Wreath has been lit up. The more candles, the closer we are to the big day ... Christmas! Each candle symbolizes a special gift of God to us ... hope ... peace ... joy ... and now love. God has added the final special ingredient to our preparation ... His love. We’ve been waiting, preparing ... it’s almost time for the celebration to begin!

From the vantage point of over 2700 years, we can more easily see God’s love for us proclaimed through His prophet Micah, (Micah 5:2) *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”* But, to God’s people, 700 years before that first Christmas, it was anything but obvious. Even to the people ***in*** Israel on the first Christmas, it wasn’t obvious.

When God inspired Micah to speak these words to His people, the powerful Assyrian Army was bearing down on them. Food supplies were scarce, water and other necessities were in short supply, things didn't look at all good for them. The rich hoarded what they could to care for themselves; while the poor suffered in deprivation. Trusting themselves first, worship of God, if even performed, had become a square-filling exercise for most. The people of God were hurting ... They were in conflict ... They needed food to sustain their physical lives ... and more importantly food for their spiritual lives. Things didn't get this way overnight. The devil took centuries preparing the world for their descent into this darkness.

And into this darkness, God sent a glimmer of light through His prophet Micah ... to give them His words of hope ... to let them know He was preparing to send the Messiah ... to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David ... a town whose name means "House of Bread."

As God's people, we know similar desperation. While those of us who live in America aren't face-to-face with a foreign enemy like Assyria, laying siege to our city, keeping flour, yeast, sugar, and bread from the shelves of Giant, Safeway, Weis, or Teeter ... we do live in a time of desperation.

We all desire our daily bread ... food and drink, shelter and clothing, jobs and security ... and see its supply threatened by others. This uncertainty leads to worry, concern and, in some places chaos and disorder. While God promises to supply all of our needs and asks us to love our neighbor in need by supplying them from the daily bread He gives us each day ... we worry ... will we have enough? Others have the same worry. Competing worries lead to competing anxieties. Competing anxieties lead to conflicts as

we look to ourselves to satisfy our own needs. Our love of neighbor ... turns into love of self ... a lack of trust in God's rich and promised provision leads to separation from God ... sin of selfishness ... and death as we provide for ourselves while depriving others.

These problems didn't happen overnight ... they've been decades in the making.

And we see this playing out in places not too far from us ... the streets of Baltimore for example. In certain parts of this city the family poverty rate exceeds 50%, the death rate for 15-to-44-year olds is more than double the local average, and unemployment exceeds 20%. These factors have built up over the decades; leading to significant criminal activity, substance abuse, violence, mental health issues, and homelessness. The resulting mixture of ingredients led to some extreme conflict and violence in early 2015.

Into this hungry place, God sent His church. Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod leaders, Rev. Martin Schultheis from Emmanuel Lutheran Church and Ms. Tina Jasion from the Lutheran Mission Society, entered to get to know, listen to, and pray with these hungry people ... to try to build relationships with them ... to bring them hope. To let them see, through their words and actions, the good news of God's mercy and grace ... the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ, His Son. It was the beginning of a long period of preparation ... but, God began mixing together unlikely people with unique talents, ideas, and views to bring His bread to hungry people.

God our Father feeds in interesting ways. His ways are not our ways for sure. God let the world know that the one who would lead in strength and bring peace to not only Israel, but to **(Micah 5:4b)** "*the ends of the earth.*," would be born in the obscure village known as Bethlehem, the "House of Bread." He warned His people too ... this preparation would take time.

God never failed in His promise. After centuries of preparation, when the time was just right ... Mary and Joseph, by a quirk of history ... directed by the hand of God ... were forced to make the 90-mile journey from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census. There ... in the still of the night ... in that out-of-the-way, backwater village, God's own Son, Jesus Christ, was born of a woman. Fully man and fully God, Jesus Christ, entered His creation in the "House of Bread" ... to feed it ... to nourish it ... to save it from the power of sin, death, and the devil.

Jesus had compassion on God's people and showed them His love ... feeding them literally even as they hungered for His teachings. With just five loaves of bread and two fish, He miraculously fed over 5000 people. Not only were their stomachs fully satisfied, but there were leftovers...twelve baskets full!

But His purpose wasn't to fill bellies with homemade bread. Jesus said, (John 6:35, 51) *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger ... I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

Jesus', the Bread of Life's, true purpose was much more ... as He showed the world while He hung dying on a cross ... the true purpose He was born for in Bethlehem 33 years before. Here the Bread of Life continued to feed His people. He forgave those who nailed Him to the cross. He gave His Word of Promise to the thief crucified with Him ... a man who hungered for God's mercy and grace. The thief asked, (Luke 23:42-43) *"Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom."* Jesus responded, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Then He died.

Three days later, on the first Easter, our Savior rose from the dead ... He defeated sin, death and the devil. Selflessly obeying the will of His Father, the Bread of Life granted His **disciples, the thief, and us, faithful believers today,** the gift of eternal life.

At perfect time, after just the right amount of preparation, Jesus Christ ... the Bread of Life, filled with the love of the Father, came down from heaven into the “House of Bread” as the Father promised. And those who believe His Word, because they believe, they consume the Bread of Life. We believe ... and the Bread of Life, the Word of God enters us ... becomes part of us ... nourishes our faith ... sustains us to eternal life.

Rev. Schultheis and Ms. Jasion brought this same Bread of Life to hungry people. Praying with them, listening to them, they built relationships. And what God told them, through those they grew to know was this – young men need preparation, training, and opportunities to learn how to use their God-given gifts to lead their families and impact their communities. With the help of the church, they began a faith-based job readiness program, Faith and Works Enterprises (<http://faithandworkenterprises.org/about/>), that not only provides practical skills to gain and keep employment, but also feeds them the Bread of Life needed to understand God’s will for them in using their gifts and talents to support their families and communities as men of God. The program, in preparation for over two years, went operational this month with numerous employers committed to hiring their trainees, including hospitals, manufacturers, and a chocolatier called “Pennsylvania Avenue Chocolates (<http://faithandworkenterprises.org/pennsylvania-avenue-chocolates/>)” which will help sustain the ministry by creating and selling chocolate bars. The pilot kicked off this month with 3 men, growing to 8 in January, enrolled. By the end of 2019, 50 men will be in the program.

One of the men hit a rough patch in his experience, challenged as never before, he became despondent that he was simply falling back into the old vicious cycle of failure. His classmates and the church encouraged him with God's Word and promise ... fed by the Bread of Life, he began to learn to trust God, place his fears of failure in His hands and has risen to the top of his class. Like good, homemade bread ... it takes a little time, but the secret ingredient of God's love makes it all worth the wait.

Faithful worship has nourished us by the same Bread of Life, served up with God's infinite love. Many here today have heard His call as He's prepared us to celebrate His Son's birth 2000 years ago in the city named "House of Bread." I'm encouraged by your many efforts, small and large, visible and hidden, to take what you've been fed by Christ, trusting Him to provide even more, and allowing Him to use you to feed others.

Together, we can respond to God's infinite love for us, shown through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ by continuing to worship Him in love each and every day. Through regular prayer and study of His Word we consume the true Bread of Life which nourishes our faith to reach out in His love to our friends, family, and neighbors in need.

One day, we don't know when, sustained by the Bread of Life, we'll experience His love in all its fullness as He welcomes us into His eternal presence. There, in the New Creation, His Bread will fill us completely and we'll never hunger again.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Philippians 4:7)

James Kent