

## God's Providence

This article comes from my sermon preparation for August 4<sup>th</sup>. The gospel reading for that Sunday is from John 6:24-35. My goal in writing to you, the people of Hopewell UMC, is to share with you what I believe to be a Spirit-inspired understanding of the passage.

Chapter six is a long and complex passage, an understanding that is reinforced by the lectionary spending five Sundays on it. One of the ways that John organizes his gospel is to organize a series of events into sevens. He has seven signs; these are miracles of Jesus that John uses to bring people to faith. He tells us the purpose of these signs in Jn. 20:30-31. There we read, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." He records seven discourses or teachings by Jesus. And he has seven I AM statements. In using the phrase I AM, he is using the name of God given to Moses. He is telling us that he is God. If you read carefully the gospel of John, you will see the phrase I AM many times but these seven I AM statements have a self-pronouncement attachment to them, that reveal God and who he is as the Christ of God. He uses all three of these indicators in chapter six. He has two signs, the third and fourth signs, the feeding of the 5,000, and Jesus' walking on the water. He has the fourth discourse on the bread of life. And he has placed in chapter six the first I AM statement. Obviously, John wants us to pay close attention to what he is writing here.

The focus on bread in the multiplication of the loaves, the focus on bread in the bread of life discourse, and the focus on bread in the I AM statement, I AM the bread of life, places our attention on the necessities of life, hence the connection of bread and life. Bread is seen as a gift of God in the Mediterranean region. Not just Christians and Jews but all peoples saw bread as a gift of God or the gods. John knows this and uses it to reveal a truth about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This truth is that God is watching over us and is seeking to give us life if we will let him.

Life, like love in the English translation of the New Testament, translates three Greek words. These words are bios, psuche, and zoe. Bios is where we get the word biology and means the physical body. Bios is not used in the gospel of John. The second word is psuche, we get our word for psychology from this word. It refers to the moral, psychology, and will of man. This is used about six times in John, mostly in chapter ten. The third term for life used in John is zoe. Zoe indicates eternal or divine life. This life only comes from God as John notes in 5:26, "For the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to also have life in himself". In using zoe, John is focusing our attention on the divine, on the spiritual. In fact, scholars of the bible see John as the most spiritual of the gospels, giving the gospel the image of an eagle as found in Ezekiel 10:14 which describes the four faces of the cherubim.

With all of this in mind, let us look at our passage, John 6:24-35. Though verse twenty-two is not in our reading, it gives the occasion for the teaching of the bread of life. And tells us the reason why the crowd searches for Jesus. They head to Capernaum by boat. When they find Jesus they ask Jesus, "when did you get here?" This introduces confusion into the conversation that ensues, for in verse twenty-two they recognize that there had been, but one boat and the disciples took it without Jesus. John uses this confusion to propel a conversation with Jesus. Jesus' response is to describe the crowd to identify who they are. They are described as not having seen a sign. This is amazing because they were participants in the miracle of the feeding. Jesus, in using the word sign, indicates that they did not understand the meaning and purpose of the sign. Instead, his next description of them makes this clear, "you seek me, not because you saw signs,

but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” In other words, they saw a miracle in which they were fed bread that filled their bellies and were seeking Jesus to fill their bellies again. They do not understand that God uses miracles for the purpose of revealing himself. They saw miracles as God’s service to them as they did in the wilderness when they complained about not having water or food. This understanding of miracles reveals the selfish aspect of humanity. This selfishness gets in our way with our relationship with God. Often, we go to God to receive forgiveness in the hope of going to heaven not to seek a loving relationship with God and to seek his will for us.

We have all been on the receiving end of people who sought us, not to get to know us, but to get something from us. We have all probably rejected those relationships. But this is not what Jesus does. As we have seen he has identified who they are and now goes on teaching them, to help them. This acceptance of who they are by Jesus and his teaching reveals something of who the Father is and who the Son is, they are the loving Father and Brother that seek to provide for us out of their divine abundance of love for us. As Jesus says in Matthew 23:37b, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” What is being revealed is the loving providence of God to provide for us and to protect us from our choices.

Providence is a word used to describe God’s benevolent care of his people. Chapter six is all about God’s benevolent care. John uses the crowd and its encounter with Jesus to describe this providence. God’s providence begins by exposing a need that we cannot satisfy, here it is physical hunger. This exposure of weakness is described by Paul (Romans 8: 19-20) as, “For the creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope”. This imposition of weakness, by God, was done in the hope of us going to God for help. This is the purpose of the Law, to expose our moral weakness. In that encounter, we are exposed to a true description of who we are. In John 5:25 Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those that hear shall live.” In this description we are described as being dead even though our hearts pump and we draw breath. He is telling us that we do not have the life of God in us. For this reason, Jesus embarks on the feeding of the five thousand so the crowd would seek after him.

Jesus’ withdrawal up the mountain and his walking on the water is part of that providence. In leaving the crowd Jesus prompts the crowd to seek after him. Jesus then describes the crowd and draws them into a conversation about their need for the bread of life.

To get to the revelation in verse thirty-five Jesus needs to confront the crowds understanding of their relationship with God, their understanding of miracles, and their understanding of the Messiah. This is done as they discuss the miracle of the manna in the wilderness. They perceive it as coming from Moses and not from the Father. They perceive it as something that the Messiah would restore at his coming. Their understanding of the miracle of manna as a messianic sign is a challenge to Jesus’ self-understanding as the Messiah. Jesus’ response is to say, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” In this Jesus expands the narrow sectarian understanding of the crowd. Their understanding is limited. It is bogged down in the physical, and Jesus seeks to reveal the life of the Father. They see manna and the Messiah as for the Jewish people. Jesus sees the bread of God as being for the world and is for more than sustenance; it is for receiving the divine life of the Father and the Son. Now Jesus reveals himself, “I AM the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” Jesus is the goal of God’s providence!