

"Simple Gifts: Food"
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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I. Introduction

One of the most interesting and puzzling characters in the New Testament is this figure of John the Baptist. He comes from a priestly family, but goes off to live in the desert (probably spending some time with the Essenes), and his preaching is so dramatic and powerful that people come from all over the area to see him. He develops a huge following that is committed enough that it continues after his death (and still exists today in a group called the Mandeans). Ultimately, of course, his preaching is so dramatic that Herod and the political establishment decide that he needs to be killed.

Among that huge following is John's younger cousin, a young man from Nazareth called Jesus. Jesus is baptized by John, spends his own formative time in the desert, and then launches his own preaching ministry after John is arrested. Even in prison, John and Jesus continue to maintain contact and talked a good bit to, and about, one another.

John is portrayed in language that echoes the prophet Elijah, with whom he has many similarities. Mark's description of his clothes very explicitly echoes the picture of Elijah in Second Kings, and the simplicity and ritual purity of his food mark him as a prophet. And it is this simplicity piece that I want to focus on this morning.

We are spending some time over these weeks of Advent looking at our call to simplicity, and the good news that through the grace and discipline of simplicity, God can help us refocus our lives, keeping the most important things the most important things. This seems a particularly important time to explore this call to simplicity, both because culturally, Advent is such a time of extravagant consumption, and because we are in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and we need to take a look as a nation at the destructive habits resulting from our affluence.

II. Simplicity in Food

I referred just now to simplicity as both a grace and a discipline, because simplicity has both elements. It is a gift that God gives us, transforming our lives in ways that keep God and God's call central to us. It is also a discipline: a set of practices that place us in the position to accept this gift.

Simplicity has both inward and outward aspects. The inward dimension has to do with quieting the chaos that so often overwhelms our spiritual life: our inner turmoil, our restlessness. In his wonderful book How Much is Enough, Bread for the World founder Art Simon says that, "Burnout often stems not so much from doing too much, but from the impression that no matter how much we do, we are not getting anywhere." Simplicity is the cure for burnout.

The outward dimension of simplicity has to do with paring down the excesses of our lives, so as to live more fully, and also in ways that make fullness of life more available to the rest of the world. Perhaps in no area of our life is this call so clear as in the area of food.

The place to start this discussion is to recognize that food is a gift. It is, in fact, God's first gift to us in the Garden of Eden. Jesus' first miracle is turning water into wine. The only miracle (other than the resurrection) reported in all four gospels is the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. For John the Baptist, the simplicity of his diet was a way of proclaiming who he was and what he valued.

Americans, of course, have a very troubled relationship with food, and tend to consume far more than we need and in ways that are unhealthy for us physically and spiritually, as well as for our world. Simplifying our eating habits will benefit us on all of these three levels.

The first is our physical health. The average North American consumes five times as much grain as a person from the developing world. Food, for us, is an addiction. I have told you all before that I'm completely compulsive about eating: if there is food in front of me, I'm going to eat it (even if I don't like it, I'll eat it). So simplifying our eating habits by eating less and eating more wisely will make us healthier.

Second: simplifying our eating habits benefits our spiritual health. Deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage, is the idea that eating can be a spiritual discipline. Long after eating kosher stopped being important for health reasons, it continued (and continues) to be a central part of Judaism because it teaches mindfulness. It teaches us to remember that everything we eat to sustain us is a gift from God. Bringing focus to what we eat and how much we eat can leave us feeling more grateful for the provisions that God has given us.

Third: simplifying our eating habits means that more people have the ability to eat. At the same time that Americans are fighting obesity, in other parts of the world, malnutrition kills over 5 million children below the age of 5 every year. Many of you probably read the many articles earlier this year about the food shortages that people are experiencing world-wide. The way we produce and consume food in our country has a profound impact on the ability of the rest of the world to eat.

III. Eating with Purpose

So how do we start? The first place, I would suggest is the amount that we eat. The vast majority of us can simply get by on less food, and be the better for it. I know that we feel like we can't, but we have been acculturated to over-eat, and we need to break that cycle. Woody Allen captured our national ethos when he said about a restaurant, "The food here is terrible, and the portions are too small."

Second, we need to eat less meat. Now don't get me wrong: I love meat, and I'm not promoting abstinence (although I think that a strong case can be made for it). But we eat a tremendous amount of meat in our country, and that meat production involves tremendous

resources. The statistics on this vary wildly, but conservatively it takes 5-10 pounds of grain to produce a pound of beef, and hundreds of gallons of water. Meat production of all sorts has a profoundly negative impact on our environment. Less meat means a healthier planet and less hunger around the world.

Third, we need to buy more locally produced foods. In an article in last week's *Washington Post*, Katherine Salant wrote an article entitled, *Want to Shrink Your Carbon Footprint? Think Food*. In it she talked about feeling very positive about her anticipated environmental impact of moving into New York City from suburban Ann Arbor; living in a much smaller place and giving up her car. When she actually researched her "carbon footprint," she found that as dramatic as her lifestyle change had been, her "carbon footprint" hadn't shrunk that much. She ended up realizing that the tremendous environmental impact of our food production system – that she was still participating in – vastly outweighed the other changes in her life.

Journalist Michael Pollan wrote a book that my wife Jeannine found quite compelling called The Omnivore's Dilemma. He devotes a good bit of time in that book to an account of the agriculture system in the United States and its impact on the environment, focusing particularly on the central role fossil fuels and chemicals play in the industrial food chain: from chemical fertilizers to providing the energy needed to run farm machinery and to process, package, and transport food. All told, it takes ten times more energy to produce the food than the food itself provides the eater.

IV. Conclusion

I have a dear friend, a Mennonite author named Cathy Hockman, who writes, "Just as some foods are physically more nourishing than others, some are spiritually more nourishing than others—or they can be. We won't find this on any label ... and we don't always think about it. But the foods we eat are not morally neutral. All foods come with stories, stories of real-world impact. Some of those stories are much more in tune with our values."

A few of you may remember a PBS show from the 1960's called the Galloping Gourmet. The Galloping Gourmet was a man named Graham Kerr, whose wife suffered a stroke and heart attack. He writes, "In 1983, my wife Treena and I chose to reduce our meat consumption by about \$20 a week for our family of four adults. We spent ten of those dollars on vegetables we really liked. We lost weight, lowered cholesterol, felt better, and we enjoyed the change. Then we took the \$10 savings, which became \$520 for the year, and invested this new money into sponsoring children with an international aid agency. One child we still support today. He lives healthily in Ethiopia and has received a Christian education and wants to be a carpenter all because of our habit change. How's that for a double benefit?"

Biblical scholars recognize that the words in our Gospel lesson this morning -- "prepare the way of the Lord" -- contain a double reference. On the one hand, it refers to the preparation that John the Baptist's preaching will make for the coming of Jesus. On the other, it reminds Christian readers to prepare for the return of the Lord in judgment. Advent is a time when we

engage in that preparation. And there is very little that will be more helpful in that process than paying some attention to how we eat.

Amen.