

# SERMON DEC 31, 2017

## JOHN 1:1-18 | KENJI KURAMITSU

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In the Beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word Was God,

This passage has a certain rhythm to it. Scholars believe this text, one of the most memorable in all scripture, was actually an early Christian hymn. The poetic images used of creation, life, light, darkness, and divine speech will remind the familiar reader of God's breath hovering over the teeming waters in the opening of the book of Genesis.

We haven't heard much at all from John's Gospel in this year's lectionary, so I'd like to give a bit of context here. The book is a quick read, apparently three hours or so in a single sitting. This book has traditionally been attributed to "the disciple whom Jesus loved," a different figure than the Baptizer we hear about in this passage.

This book is dated to around sixty years after Jesus' death, and likely arises from a painful time of "sibling a conflict," as a Jewish Christian community split from a local synagogue. Although centuries have passed since this Gospel was composed, remember that as we read this text in worship, we aren't eavesdropping on some dusty conversation that was never meant for us.<sup>1</sup> As Christians, we are in some mystical way in continuity with the Church that collected and harvested these verses of celebration, participating together in the Risen Life of God in Christ.

John's text is quite distinct at times from the accounts of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Sometimes called the most "spiritual" Gospel, John tends to devote much more attention to Christ's words than his miraculous works. Jesus is also far more confident with his identity as Messiah than in other accounts,

Here's what interests me most: John is also known for employing a number of tangible, familiar images to communicate complicated spiritual ideas: Jesus is identified as the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God. These metaphors, drawn from gardening, baking, eating and animal husbandry, highlight the everyday and the natural world as drenched with God's intimacy and presence.

With this earthy language in mind, we should resist imagining Jesus' as being specially beamed to our dimension from a separate plane, in the manner of a Distant Galactic Emperor condescending to view his colonies. Jesus is indigenous to this earth. In this Gospel, Jesus calls himself "the living bread that came down from heaven,"<sup>2</sup> but Jesus is also the living bread that *came up from the earth*, a holy produce cultivated in our very midst. The God we know in Christ comes to us from within creation itself. Jesus' body, like ours, is a product of *this* planet, carried to us by dark soil and mineral elements, the evolutionary process,<sup>3</sup> the pangs of human birth, and the calloused hands of nurturers and caregivers.

Many parts of scripture riff on this idea that human beings are wheat, chaff, a kind of harvest. The prophet Isaiah comments that "all flesh is grass," juxtaposing human mortality with "God's word [which] will exist forever." The food journalist Michael Pollan draws inspiration from this line, pointing out that all flesh *is* grass because every thing that exists must trace its life energy, in the end, from greenery: "with a particular plant growing in a specific patch of soil...somewhere on earth."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:51.

<sup>3</sup> "Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation," by Ivone Gebara, 190.

<sup>4</sup> "A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming," by Sallie McFague, 126.

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<sup>1</sup> "Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," by Sandra Schneiders.

In recent years, many factors including documentary films have challenged us to think more deeply about where the food that sustains us comes from, and the human hands that touch our produce on its way to our tables. As I investigated a bit where my groceries come from, I also became curious about the sourcing of our Communion elements here at church. As our centering meal as Christians, surely the Eucharist should help us to trace our relationships to those particular plants and specific soils, the natural world that feeds all of us.

Our bread here is made of wheat, honey, oil, milk, salt and water. Its ingredients come from local farms and purchased in neighborhood grocery stores. I know this because I interviewed some of the SPR members who bake our Communion bread each week. Through these conversations, I glimpsed some of the deeper meaning that parishioners draw from their feeding us in the Eucharist. For some bakers, their Midwestern Lutheran farming roots or Jewish heritage helps them feel a special, ancestral and spiritual connection with the delicate bread-making process. For those with children, who help to cut crosses in the dough and pray over the snowy orbs before they slide into the oven, this act offers reminders that each of our labors is an important part of our church's existence.

I also spent time researching the vineyards that provide our altar wines, most of which are located in California. I recently called up one of these companies, told them about this sermon, and was quite helpfully painted a picture of the fields that fill our cups. Many Californian farms, I learned, were subjected to smoke exposure as this fall's intense wildfires raged, which may actually alter the flavor of next year's harvest.

We do not have our communion wine without healthy fields, nor without the workers who harvest their grapes. When I asked about one company's compensation and labor practices, their President told me that "in the old days we used to bring 'em in from Tijuana but now...I'm sure some slip in that are illegals...but for the most part we have records." I know the new documentary film *Dolores* explores some of the

historic struggles of the region's agricultural workers. More recent news I found explained that many undocumented workers in California's grape fields, many of whom work more than ninety hours a week during harvest time, have been left destitute after these wildfires, disqualified for disaster aid because of their immigration status.<sup>5</sup> Beyond natural disasters, it is us who continue to fragment one another along lines of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and class.

Every time I have the chance to preach here, I talk about the Eucharist. Because at this table, we severed limbs are remade into One Body. Here each week, we celebrate Jesus not as some dim memory, but as John described him: the Bread of Life and the True Vine. In the Eucharist, Christ is literally re-membered in our midst.

Here's a secret I've discovered while serving as a chalice-bearer: every time that cup is lifted to your face, if the light catches right, sunlight arches upwards and drenches your skin in the most beautiful bronze and copper as you drink. We don't simply use gleaming silver vessels because we are wealthy, snobby Episcopalians. These objects' physical beauty reflects something of the divine image which saturates all of us and all of Creation. There's a reason we don't serve each other Christ's Blood from plastic water bottles, or bless McRibs and Pork Rinds to serve as Jesus' body. All these symbols, these metaphors matter because of what they signify – everything about this meal is meant to point to the innate dignity of all creatures as guests at God's banquet.

St. Paul famously pleads with the Corinthian church to consider carefully what it means to take communion, and not do so without serious reflection.<sup>6</sup> I love how everyone is welcome to receive communion at this church. And in

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<sup>5</sup> "Everywhere we go, people have told us, 'If you don't have papers, we can't help you'...There is nothing for us." – *Newsweek*, 10.30.17, "Wine Country Fires Leave Undocumented Workers Searching for Aid, Hope"

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 11: 27-34

receiving that bread and that wine, we are unable to pretend any longer that our lives are somehow disconnected from the rape of the natural world, the oppression of human beings, and all living creatures.

In this cup, we don't only drink Christ's blood – we guzzle the earth's bounty, the labor of human hands; every time we lift that cup to our lips, we meet there the sacred land and the undocumented workers who helped to harvest those grapes; in the same way, every time we accept that bread, our lips are touched by not only Christ's body but the people who picked that wheat and who baked for us, God's children who deserve housing security, health care, full stomachs. Will we speak a blessing to those whose energy gives us life, or will we damn them?

The prayers of the people that I hear here each week remind me that we are always circling new beginnings and endings. In the beginning...another new year is birthed tonight. Maybe you're thinking about personal resolutions or reflecting on healing practices to take up this season. I think the most life-changing resolutions (and revolutions) often start when we trace their vaulting ambitions to one-step-at-a-time, local impacts. As volunteers in our Food Garden can tell you, big things have small beginnings, sprouting up delicately from forgotten patches of dirt.

The old saying tells us that we are what we eat. St. Augustine put it this way: "When you were purified, you were ground, when you were baptized, you became dough, when you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were baked." All flesh is grass – our bodies, silver vessels of wheat, honey, oil, milk, salt and water. So come and eat: "Behold what you are. Become what you receive."