



LUCY LIND HOGAN

# What's for Dinner?

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters . . .*

*Listen carefully to me,  
and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.*

Isaiah 55:1a, 2b, 3a

**F**or what does today's Christian thirst? For what do people hunger? What is the feast that we must spread before them that will nourish and sustain? How do we decide what they want, what is best, what is appropriate?

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul developed an interesting analogy for preaching. The analogy was also picked up by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. Paul, and that unknown author, likened the profession of preacher to that of chef. In deciding what to say, and what not to say, the preacher must, like a chef, decide what the listener, or diner, is ready to digest. Because the Christians in Corinth were "newborns," Paul fed them "with milk, not solid food, for [they] were not ready for solid food" (1 Cor. 3:2).

As the writer of Hebrews observed:

For everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:13-14)

Paul recognized that people are at different places in their faith journeys and consequently have different needs. With today's knowledge of diets and nutrition, Paul's analogy could be even more specific than milk and solid food. We know the importance of choosing among a low-fat, low-carbohydrate, high-protein, or vegetarian diet. We know that there are specific diets for specific problems—weight loss, diabetes, high cholesterol, or heart trouble.

The importance of food is woven through Scriptures. When the Israelites complained of hunger in the wilderness, God rained down bread from heaven. Isaiah assured the exiles that the day of God's plenty was coming, for the day would soon be there when everyone who was hungry and thirsty would be satisfied, even if they had no money. And Joel foresaw a day when "the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water" (3:18).

John tells us that Jesus' first miracle was to turn ordinary water into the finest wine. All the Gospels record the feast of bread and fish brought forth from only a few loaves and fishes—a feast so large there were twelve baskets left over. And, on his final evening with his disciples,

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CI5-0687070368. Paper, \$13.00

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*While accepting the reality of God,  
they seem very uncertain about what God  
wants them to do, and they see the sermon  
as the place where that is explained  
and the connections are made. There is a God,  
and they want the preacher to help them to  
understand God's directions the same way God  
made it clear for Moses, Jonah, and Mary.*



Jesus invited them to celebrate the Passover meal, sharing in the bread and the wine that proclaimed God's love and graciousness.

As preachers we have the marvelous joy and privilege of spreading before our listeners the wonderful banquet of the Word of God, the message of that love and graciousness. Whether it is the milk of our gospel message that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" or the solid food of the call to give up all that we have, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus, we never lack for nourishing fare.

However, choosing the right "diet" for the right person is one of the things that makes preaching so challenging. Therefore, an important question that confronts preachers is—"Who decides what we shall eat and what we shall drink?" Is the preacher the person who makes the decision whether to serve milk or solid food? Or does the congregation determine the content of the preaching? What are some of our options?

## Chez Panisse

I call one approach "Chez Panisse," and I think that it is the approach I use most often.

In Berkeley, California, there is a restaurant made famous by its chef, Alice Waters. Ms. Waters determines the evening menu by what is the freshest food at the market. Each morning she goes to the farmer's market and looks over the produce, to the fish market and sees what

has been caught that morning, and then decides what to do with those marvelous ingredients.

When I am preparing my sermon I "go to the market." I open myself in prayer to listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit. I read over the lessons appointed for the day. I reflect upon the moment we are in. What joys have filled our lives? What sorrows and pains have assaulted us? Who is going to be in the pew? What questions do I hear? What is God doing? All of these, then, become the ingredients from which I assemble the Sunday-morning feast.

## Nutritionist

There are times, however, when I "read" the situation and decide that I must be more pro-active. I must then become a nutritionist or dietician who decides that the congregation needs a particular diet. That, I think, was how Paul saw himself.

When my husband was in the hospital recovering from a heart attack, the dietician always gave him a low-fat, low-salt diet. It made my physician-husband irritated. "I don't have hypertension! I don't need a low-salt diet. Bring me a saltshaker." (I never did, and he adjusted.)

There are many times when we, as preachers, must decide what we will serve. Like Paul, we decide whether a congregation is ready for solid food, or whether milk is all they can digest. The prophetic preacher is the dietician for the

people of God, deciding whether the sick “patient” needs the “comfort food” of Second Isaiah or the punitive “low-salt, low-cholesterol” diet of early Jeremiah.



## What Do You Want for Dinner?

There is yet another way to decide what will appear at the banquet table, and that is to ask the people who will be dining. My sixteen-year-old usually asks, “What’s for dinner?” in the middle of breakfast. But, if he doesn’t, I often ask what the family would like

Karl Barth said that the people in the pew have only one question when they walk in the door of the church: “Is it true?” What if we asked people today what they want? I must confess, I have never asked that general question. I have involved parishioners in roundtable discussions about specific sermons, such as “What issues are raised by the lessons for the third Sunday in Lent?” But I never asked them, “What are you looking for in sermons? What questions do you have that you would like answered?” So, for this article, I did. And I was fascinated by the results.

My best friend has been the pastor of a United Methodist congregation for the past twenty years. It is, to paraphrase an old song, “a little bit country, a little bit city.” At several church meetings and study groups she, and her assistant, distributed a questionnaire that I had developed:

- When the preacher stands up to preach on Sunday morning, what are some of the questions you believe are in the minds and hearts of the people listening?
- If you could make suggestions about possible sermon topics or themes, what would be on the list?
- Think about the past few days or week. What questions have weighed heavily on your heart?

I also posed those same questions to students and colleagues at Wesley

Theological Seminary. So, what do people want for the gospel feast?

Overwhelmingly, people want something that is nutritious and sustaining. Two major responses emerged. People wanted sermons that addressed: (1) the pragmatic, ethical questions that focus on actions, both God’s and ours, and (2) the ontological questions, “What kind of Christian should I be?”

The first constellation of questions that is most on people’s minds as they listen to sermons concerns our actions as Christians. For example, “What will I be able to get out of this sermon that I could apply to my everyday life?” Another person wrote, “I enjoy sermons that speak to me about everyday issues. Things that are happening in my life and in my community.” And another asked, “What can I take home with me?” They want sermons that make connections between what happens on Sunday morning and what they do the rest of the week, Monday through Saturday. Because, as one person observed, if the preacher’s message does not “relate to my personal life,” it will not “keep my interest.”

Subsumed in these questions of application are more specific questions about the interaction between faith and what is going on in their lives. “How do we cope when we face adversity, such as serious illness or divorce? How can I change my life, feel less anxiety, overcome my fear of failure? How do Scriptures relate to the weekly world events? Will I be more at peace this week tending the message?”

While people did wonder about God’s presence or actions in the face of tragedy, and express concern about discerning God’s will for them and for the church, they did not seem to question the reality of God. They were not asking so much about the truth of God and God’s actions in the world (for example, asking if there is a God), as much as about the incom-

prehensibility of God’s will for them. While accepting the reality of God, they seem very uncertain about what God wants them to do, and they see the sermon as the place where that is explained and the connections are made. There is a God, and they want the preacher to help them to understand God’s directions the same way God made it clear for Moses, Jonah, and Mary.

The second constellation of questions revolves around the general question of, “Am I the person God would want me to be?” “Is God the priority in my life?” Or, as many observed, God seems to be pushed aside by concerns of work and family, “my needs/wants versus God’s needs/wants.” They question, “How do we as individuals measure up to God’s expectations?”

People want things that they can carry away with them. They want specific, concrete actions. They don’t want us to talk about Christian charity in the abstract; they want us to show them how to live out the gospel of compassion in



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their town, their community. They want us to show them what they can and should be doing that very week.

If you think in terms of sermon form, they want an inductive/deductive sermon. They want a sermon that begins with the specific, the concrete, the here-and-now, and moves to the abstract/general. They then want that sermon to move from the

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abstract/general back to the specific and concrete. They want to see how their lives are found in the Scriptures, but then make the movement back to their lives. They want to know about the issues of faith, but they also want to see the “cash value” of those issues. What do they look like? What do they “live” like?

## How Does It Taste?

Any good cook will tell you that good food, in addition to being nutritious, must also be pleasing to the eye and the taste buds. When one is fixing dinner, one is always checking the seasoning. “How does it taste?” Perhaps you are like me in that when you get a cold, you lose your sense of taste. That is so frustrating. I know that I have a healthy, nutritious meal on my plate, but if I can’t taste it, savoring the spices, I don’t want to eat it.

No matter how nutritious and filling our sermons are, they must also delight. Sermons need to be tasty. They need to be entertaining. The root of the word *entertain* is *tenere*, “to hold.” We have to craft sermons that will hold people’s attention. Many people observed that they looked forward to hearing interesting stories that captured their imaginations. As one person noted, she always wondered, “Will the presentation keep my interest with a combination of sincerity, scripture, and humor?” How do you season your sermons?

People are hungering for God’s Holy Word. They long to feast at the banquet table that will sustain and nurture them. But, as we think about the meal that we will serve, there are a number of things we must remember.

## Christ Is the Host

The image of feeding the people of God is a wonderful metaphor for preaching—as long as we remember who is the host. Christ is the host at our table. It is Christ who, as the service of Word and Table reminds us, “invites to his table all who love him.” The Holy Spirit is going out into the highways and byways drawing people into the church, and we must be ready to feed the most unlikely group of people. God’s guest list is not necessarily our list. God has graciously called us to share in the ministry of proclamation, sending us out into the world to share the good news. We may be the chefs, but Christ owns the restaurant.

## Who Decides What We Will Eat?

As preachers we may ask the question, "What do people want for dinner/What are people looking for in a sermon?" But we must remember that, in the end, we are the ones who decide what we will eat for dinner.

Food is constantly on the mind of my sixteen-year-old "bottomless pit" son. And, while I usually ask him what he wants for dinner, for a long time he had only one response: drumsticks. I tried to honor his request occasionally, but I certainly didn't fix chicken drumsticks every time he asked for them. Likewise, I wouldn't allow him to exist on a diet of pizza and soft drinks. It is part of my "mother" job to make him eat something that comes close to a balanced diet.

Likewise, it is part of our "preacher" job to make sure that our congregations listen to a balanced sermon diet. We do want to listen to and attend to the questions being asked by the person in the pew. But, as a friend of mine has wondered, what about the questions people are afraid to ask? What about those questions that are buried deep in our hearts? What about the fears that we are not willing to admit? What about the issues we prefer to sweep under the rug? It is our role as preachers to raise those questions before the congregation and give voice to those questions and issues the congregation is not ready to face. Ultimately, we write the sermon. We, the preachers, are the ones who decide what we will put on the preaching table each Sunday morning.

Those decisions are not always easy to make. It would be nice if writing a sermon was like baking a cake. If I want to bake a cake I open one of my many cookbooks and look for a recipe that is appealing and includes those ingredients I have on hand.

If I see a particular cake I want, I may even go to the store and get what I need. But, once I begin to put together the cake, the cookbook tells me what ingredients need to go into the cake, the exact quantity of each ingredient, and how to combine them to achieve the desired result. If I follow the recipe, I can usually be sure that I will end up with a delicious cake.

But writing a sermon is not like following a recipe today. It is more like baking a cake centuries ago when the recipes called for a handful of this and a pinch of that. My mother-in-law gave me a recipe for my husband's favorite frosting. One of the directions told me to "put the pan of frosting on the back step until it looks right." And my husband wonders why the frosting doesn't always come out "like my mother's."

Our sermons need to be put out on the back step until they look right. We can invite comments and reflections from our congregations. We can read all of the Bible commentaries and sermon helps. But eventually, we are the ones who, with love, compassion, wisdom, and experience, must put together the feast. Our preaching should not just be telling people what they want to hear. It should be telling them what God wants them to hear.

*If we declare,  
"We all know  
what happened  
to King David,"  
will that nourish  
the newborn  
Christian?  
If our sermon  
tells people over  
and over that  
God loves them,  
will that feed the  
Christian who is  
struggling with  
finding a way to  
share his or her  
faith in the  
workplace?*

## Something for Everyone

Finally, we need to be sensitive to the many diets required by our listeners. Paul seems to indicate that it was an either/or proposition. He either offered a congregation milk or he fed them a diet of solid food. For most preachers today, the choice is not that simple. On any given Sunday morning we have people in our congregations who need

many different diets. We have those who are just beginning to learn about the faith. Are they even ready for milk? They do not know the stories. They do not know our history. They do not know the traditions. They do not know the language. They are hungry for everything, but we must give them very simple fare. We have newborn Christians who are still on a milk diet. And we have Christians who, having developed sophisticated palates, are ready for rich and complex fare.

As difficult as it often is, we must make sure that our sermons contain something for people at various stages in their faith journey. It means that we must look over our table and make sure that there is something everyone can eat. We must read through our sermons and make sure that we do not assume too much on the part of our listeners. If we declare, "We all know what happened to King David," will that nourish the newborn Christian? If our sermon tells people over and over that God loves them, will that feed the Christian who is struggling with finding a way to share his or her faith in the workplace? We need to have something for everyone.

Ours is a God of love and compassion. Ours is a God whose mercy is overflowing. Ours is a God who has spread before us a glorious feast of joy and good news. And, as my questions revealed, people long to hear that joy and good news. They want to hear about what God has in store for them. They want to hear about what God would have them do.

We continue in a long line of God's cooks setting before God's people dishes of bread, wine, milk, and honey. We are asked to call people to the feast. And, with God's help and encouragement, may we continue to prepare meals that will nourish and sustain God's people as they march toward Zion. □



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