

Eternity's Quiver

John 6: 35, 41-51

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...
...Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Even though it was a few years ago, I can still remember the evening after I received the news that my grandmother had died. As the sun shimmied its way toward dusk, the dog and I went for our ritual nightly stroll around the block. The sunset painted the sky an evocative fluorescent pink that night; I remember my grief being colored in the shade of a deep purple. The sun was setting in such a way that the rays must have bounced off the stratosphere at the perfect angle, because I could see the glow of what looked like a film curving around the entire arc of the planet. It seemed like a thin layer of eternity's presence was already surrounding us, tightly hugging the earth. I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but in the moment, there was a release inside of me—a peace, a comfort. It was then these words found me:

Pause.
Slow down.
Take a breath.
Can you not feel
The quiver in your bones
Announcing that eternity has already begun?

...whoever believes has eternal life...

Have you ever experienced the quiver before? The sense that eternity is already here, and we are already within it? I'm not sure how to explain it. It is ineffable, beyond rationalization and full of mystery. Maybe we felt its quiver after a loved one had died. Inside the cloudy grief there was a presence or a word or a comfort that interrupted us and we somehow knew that they were going to be okay. That their death was merely a sidestep into the mystery of the next life. We can't explain it. We dare not try to turn it into a rationalization. I have a friend who visited the concentration camps in Auschwitz. There you can still see the concrete slabs where the gas

chambers used to be and a grassy pasture where an eerie stillness remains. As he was taking in the heaviness, suddenly, a herd of deer interrupted as they pranced in arcs around the landscape, playing and chasing each other through the grass and among the concrete slabs. Then a colony of hundreds of butterflies swarmed the area, their rainbow-colored wings dancing in the air. He says it was the most powerful thing he has ever seen: a reminder that death has been put in its place—a sign of eternity’s presence breaking through in the now. We can’t explain it. All we can do is marvel in its mystery. Have you ever had an experience like that? A quiver in your bones announcing that eternity has already begun?

In John’s gospel eternal life is a big deal. Seventeen times he talks about eternal life coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The other gospel writers only use the phrase a couple of times each, but for John eternal life is the point of why Jesus came to us: “For God so loved the world, God sent Jesus so that whoever believes will not perish but will have eternal life.”

Now I’m not sure about you, but I grew up being taught that eternity was primarily some transcendent, off-in-the-distance realm that we all floated away to after our ticket got punched. A realm where I would be greeted by all my family and friends, who are draped in their angelic white robes. They would then take me to the throne of God where I would spend the rest of eternity singing ‘hallelujah’ hymns to the Creator and my voice would never get tired. And, by the way, the primary purpose of believing in Jesus was to secure a place for myself in eternity’s forever land so I wouldn’t have to be so petrified of death when it came. Except, if the promises of eternal life that Jesus speaks of today in our passage is only about what happens to us when we hit our expiration date, then it doesn’t feel like enough good news to me. What about the eternal life that has already begun? Where is the quiver?

What I was never told was that eternal life was not only about a transcendent space which we will one day occupy, but *an immanent reality which we already live inside of in this very moment*. Jesus comes to us full of eternity’s right-now possibilities and he offers the gift to anyone who is hungry for it. He fills baskets with bread for 5,000 plus people because eternity’s reality is about God’s abundance available to us now. He raises his buddy Lazarus from the tomb because inside of eternity’s reality death does not get to have the final word. Not here, not today!

Seven times in John’s gospel Jesus keeps saying “I AM! I AM the Bread of Life, who will not perish like the manna in the wilderness. I AM the Resurrection, with an uncontainable love that not even death can diminish. I AM the way, the truth and the life--eternity’s presence in a pair of sandals, with a thick head of hair and a beard! I AM!” Not I will be, not I once was. Not in the past tense and not someday in the future. But “I AM.” Now, right here in the present. So if you are sick and tired, or simply sick and tired of being sick and tired. Whether you are dreary because of the world’s problems or growing weary and wondering what we can really do to combat injustice; whether you are exhausted from carrying regret, harboring resentment, wallowing in a wound, or living inside a perpetual state of anxiety. Jesus says, “I AM the embodied presence of eternity, kicking up dirt with these feet and offering the bread of life with these hands, because this is what it means to be inside of God’s eternal reality, now.

So, if what Jesus is saying is true, that whoever believes has eternal life, how might eternity’s ubiquitous reality shape our lives today? How would eternity being now shape our relationships? How might it reset our priorities? How could it help with our pernicious anxieties? How might it set us free to be the church?

Perhaps you've heard of Greyston Bakery in NYC? At Greyston Bakery they make brownies—35,000 pounds of spongy chocolatey goodness every. single. day. Their claim to fame is that their brownies are used in Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream. Greyston Bakery got its start because a few people realized that crime, relapse, homelessness and food insecurity in their communities was the result of people being discriminated against when it came to job opportunities. It seems companies are hesitant to hire drug dealers, prostitutes, gang members and ex-inmates who are on parole. So at Greyston Bakery they have an Open Hiring process—if one job opens up, then they take the next applicant on the list, no questions asked. Get this: their motto is, "We don't create jobs to make brownies, we make brownies to create jobs." It's a place where profit margins aren't nearly as important as the people who are on the margins. Where lives and communities are being transformed by the quivering new life of God's Eternal reality breaking through in the now—one job, one person, one spongy chocolatey brownie at a time. What might be possible if we were set free by trusting that what Jesus said was true? "Whoever believes has eternal life..."

John's gospel wants us to know that whoever dares to trust in the I AMness of Jesus Christ,¹ has access to eternal life's reality here and now. We are already within it, and it is already within us. So...

Pause...
Slow down...
Take a breath...
Can you not feel
the quiver in your bones,
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¹ After the service someone wrote the question on their bulletin, "What about people who don't believe in Jesus, do they receive salvation?" My response to this anonymous inquiry is that Jesus says, "Whoever believes..." The Greek word is *pistos* which connotes not only a mental belief, but also means "faith" and "trust." In other words, Jesus is not asking us to believe in him *per se*, but to trust in him and live into the reality he brings. "If you've seen me you've seen the father," he often says (John 14:9). For John's gospel, as well as the point of the sermon, eternal life is a reality manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, and a reality Jesus expects his followers to live into with trust in the present. Those who indeed live inside of such a reality (Gandhi for example) regardless of their religious affiliation is, in my opinion, a "whoever" who both embodies salvation and trusts in the deeper reality of peace, hope, justice and love.