Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

~ John 6:35

John 6:24-35
When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Give us this bread always.” 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.”

INTRODUCTION
Way back, God spoke to the doubtful liberator, Moses, through the fiery bush: “I AM who I AM. Tell them I AM sent you.”¹ In John’s gospel, Jesus says: “I AM the light of the world.”² I AM the resurrection.³ I AM the bread the life.”⁴ ⁵

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¹ Exodus 3  
² John 8:12  
³ John 11:25  
⁴ John 6:35–48  
⁵ More I AM statements of Jesus: John 6:35, 48; John 8:58, John 8:58, John 10:7-9; John 10:11; John 14:6; John 15:1. For each “I AM” statement, read the entire passage (before and after those statements) to better understand the context and main point of each.
These phrases are indicators, invitations to experience profound beauty and power. Do we believe these statements, or will we, like the crowd in today’s scripture lesson, continue to fixate on the special effects: a rabbi who feeds a multitude using only a few loaves and fishes, a burning bush that talks, a guy who is crucified but comes back to life. Really? And what about the bread and the cup over there on the communion table? What are they pointing toward? We see images, symbols, signposts—all of them showing us the way to a deeper truth, but we get distracted by the image, the interpretation, the knowledge, and we neglect to experience, for ourselves, the meaning behind the symbol.

THE POINT

The Buddhists say: The finger is not the moon.6 If, on a clear night, I point moon-ward, inviting you to enjoy the moon’s beauty with me but you look only at my finger, my pointing has failed.7 The finger is not the moon.

VISIONARY: FANNY CROSBY

There was once a little baby who lived in Brooklyn. Her name was Fanny, and when she was six-weeks-old, she got a cold so severe she became completely blind. She grew up there, in the 1800s—without talking crosswalks, without Braille restaurant menus—and she became famous as a poet, a Baptist mission worker and a lobbyist for educating the blind. Fanny Crosby is best known as the “mother of congregational singing” and “the queen of gospel” revival songs. Today, one-hundred years after her death, it’s hard to find a Protestant hymnal that does not contain a Fanny Crosby hymn. She wrote hymns about her experiences which, it turns out, were more profound than the troubles of this world: the eternal life which she experienced in the here and now. She called her experience with Jesus “a foretaste of glory divine.”

GRIEVING PAUL

I had such an experience about a month ago when I got a phone call from my god-daughter, Kate, saying that she, her sisters and her mother, my BFF Julie, were driving frantically to the hospital in Atlanta because her Uncle Paul was having a heart attack.

I met Paul Owens around 1980. You teenagers know the feeling: yeah, there’s my best friend’s younger brother, whatever. But as we all matured, I counted Paul as my dear friend, my almost-brother. Now I realize that I took him for granted like we do with our closest family members. How many years will it take for me to learn what God has been saying forever: every day is a gift—life in this world so very precious—have abundant life.8 By the time they reached the hospital, Paul had had multiple heart attacks, his brain severely damaged from lack of oxygen.

While that was happening in Atlanta, I was cooking dinner here in San Francisco, and suddenly, a strong wind blew our back door open, and, turning around with a start, I began to cry uncontrollably. Something told me that Paul was gone. Have you had an experience like that—a profound sign? Maybe that’s how Moses felt at the burning bush.

The medical staff at Emory University Hospital brought Paul “back” thirteen times. Thirteen opportunities for Paul to remain in this world but Paul and God talked it over, and they made other plans. I still do not approve of those plans. No healthy forty-six-year-old who is able to get himself to the hospital should die.

Of course, I’m describing the chaos of grief: anger, sadness, bargaining…9 Now, I know what therapist Lyn Prashant says is true when she tells us that “[g]rief is the most available untapped, emotional resource for personal transformation.”10 I even point you toward that truth. But when grief is raw and personal, we can only perceive the pointing finger, like darts shooting at us, mostly missing but hurting anyway. The moon is not an option, only the finger.

I was called on to preach Paul’s funeral on Father’s Day in our hometown Methodist church in northwest Georgia. Julie, who is such a gifted stage director, had planned a beautiful funeral for her little brother. She wanted us “to do him justice.” Since all I could feel was the panic of grief, I wrote out my every word and rubric: “Victor calls Julie to the pulpit. Victor sits. He drinks water and tries to calm down.” I was best addressed in third person, too crazy feeling to be real. In the midst of painful chaos, control feels like comfort, but God was pointing me elsewhere.

I made a bargain with myself that, if I held it together leading Paul’s service, once the it was over, I would lock myself in the men’s room and reenact Sally Fields’ mad scene from Steel Magnolias.11 So, I pronounced the benediction, and as

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6 See also “The Philosophy of Buddhism” discussed informally at <http://www.buddha101.com/p_path.htm> (July 28, 2015)
8 John 10:10
11 “I’m so mad I don’t know what to do! I want to know why!” See Sally for yourself: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZx1W6cHw-g
the family left the room, the pianist and organist began to play Blessed Assurance, Fanny Crosby's greatest hit. Julie and I did not plan this, the Spirit did. Just then, Paul's father turned back, and he ran to embrace me. Finally, I could break down and have my emotions. Whatever Jesus means in those “I am the resurrection, I am the bread of life” statements—that's exactly what I experienced as the Spirit sang through the people. I knew we would be alright. I knew that Paul was okay. I knew something I cannot put words to.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Refrain: This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels, descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

JOHN 6: BRIEF EXEGETICAL RANT

The crowd had just witnessed the miracle of Jesus feeding the multitude, and they had eaten their fill of the food that could not be fully consumed, like the burning bush. Instead of being moved to deeper faith, they were dazzled. Jesus takes one of his famous time-outs, ticked everyone off, sailing over to Peter's house, and the crowd actually gets into boats to follow him.

When they find Jesus, he warns us, once again, about the—dare I call it sin—which we all commit by imagining God as the magical ATM in the sky that provides us with money, winning lottery numbers, Grammy Awards—even parking spaces! We presume that these worldly “blessings” are proof that our faith is real, and surely, when we all get to heaven, we'll have bigger homes, walk on streets of gold, and have 24/7 valet parking. Things are not faith, the finger not the moon.

INVITATION TO THE TABLE OF ETERNITY

In the study Bible we used in seminary, John’s gospel is annotated by New Testament scholar Gail O'Day12—of the Wake Forest Divinity School. In O’Day’s running commentary of John 6, there’s a peculiar, set-apart “special note” as if she is saying: “Would all of you please pay attention to this for once?”

SPECIAL NOTE

‘Eternal life’ does not speak of immortality or a future life in heaven, but is a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God.13

This is what Jesus told Nicodemus, only three chapters ago: “whosoever believes in me will have eternal life.”14 And the woman at the well: “The living water I give will become a spring that gushes eternal life.”15 And in a moment: “The bread is my body, the cup my blood.”16 John writes of a Jesus who points us to the moon, “what’s behind what’s behind the sky.”17

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12 Dean of The Divinity School at Wake Forest University
14 John 3:16
15 John 4:14
16 Communion Liturgy upcoming
17 See Allen Shawn’s Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician, accessed online at https://books.google.com/books?id=sVjmbAAAQBAJ&pg=PA64&dq=%22what%27s+behind+what%27s+behind+the+sky%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiH2K3hjvTXAhWJzDQKHbfICe8Q6AEIHDAA#v=onepage&q=%22what%27s+behind+what%27s+behind+the+sky%22&f=false (July 30, 2015)
Peel the onion until you uncover this spiritual truth, the real sustenance which is greater than any condition or pain or anxiety or diagnosis. It holds the power to defeat even death. And, it’s already here, all around us, all the time, just out of sight, almost touchable, barely noticeable—still, small, and it will never stop speaking the words of eternal life. So many signs, and they all point towards home.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving
The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts…