

ROCKY ROAD

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” ⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:53-69, NRSV)

On Friday the police temporarily closed Northern Boulevard near Munsey Park School when heavy rains flooded the street. Some parts of the metropolitan area reported 3 inches of rain in one hour. Earlier this month heavy rains in Arizona of all places caused flooding. The water did major damage to the Mt. Lemmon Highway. According to news reports, “The worst damage happened about 10 miles from the base of the mountain near Needle Rock, where water from three waterfalls came together [with a] force that blasted out the road” (<http://kvoa.com/Global/story.asp?S=5228755&nav=HMO6>). Amazingly, “a rock as tall as a house...thundered down a hill in [the] downpour” (Ibid.).

We all know that life’s road turns rocky sometimes. While none of us are likely to face a literal rock the size of a house, we all face rocks, obstacles of various sizes. Sometimes life’s difficulties are as minor as a rock in our shoe. At other times the rock may be an unforeseen stumbling block that trips us up and slows us down. And then there are those gigantic boulders the size of a house, which send us on an unexpected detour.

At one time or another, most of us have faced a crisis in our faith, a theological stumbling block, a spiritual roadblock. Sometimes these crises arise out of an emotionally difficult situation. Sometimes after the death of a loved one, in our grief and loneliness, we wonder if there is a God or at least a God who cares. Sometimes when the doctor gives us a dreaded diagnosis we ask ourselves, “Where is God?” Sometimes when we just can’t get a break, can’t find a job, can’t help our children through a crisis, can’t improve the lives of our elderly parents, we wonder if this God business isn’t pure fiction.

At times our issues with faith and God arise not out of a difficult life situation, but rather from a specific theological tenet or belief that doesn’t ring true. Back in

Jesus' day, many people rejected him because he did not fit their idea of who the Messiah should be. Many expected a great military leader like King David who would overthrow the Romans. They expected someone armed for battle, leading the charge on a white stallion. No one expected a compassionate teacher riding on Palm Sunday's humble donkey.

Nowadays many give up on their spiritual quest because the God they learned about in Sunday School or the dogma they heard from the minister just doesn't make sense anymore. Many people reject God because they cannot believe in a literal 7-day creation story. I wish they knew that in a free church like ours many of us reject a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Many people reject church because they erroneously think that all Christians are closed-minded war mongering anti-Semitic bigots who oppress women, gays, lesbians, and people of other faiths. I wish they knew of open-minded churches like ours that promote peace, reconciliation, freedom, and a place for everyone at God's table. Our goal is to remove every roadblock and hindrance to faith in God, not to create additional ones.

Today's scripture lesson talks about a stumbling block to faith in Jesus' day. In truth, this passage continues to be a roadblock to ecumenical harmony because even today scholars can't agree on what Jesus actually meant. This passage is the most hotly debated text in the Gospel of John. The crux of the controversy can be found in Jesus' words starting with v. 53, "Jesus said, 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them'" (John 6:53-56).

A few verses down we're told that many who heard him began grumbling about this teaching being too hard to accept. Instead of watering down his teaching, Jesus ups the ante saying, "If you find this hard to believe, what would you think if you saw the Son of Man ascending up into heaven where he came from?" He went on to tell them that his words had life giving power and that belief in him was a gift from God.

Verse 66 tells us that because of these teachings, many of Jesus' followers left and no longer wanted to be associated with him. They threw in the towel and gave up on him being the promised messiah. They literally turned around and walked away from Christ. In the next verse Jesus looks at his twelve disciples and asks if they want to abandon him as well. They don't.

What about us? Do we want to turn our backs on Jesus and walk away? Or maybe the faith foundation that once held us up has crumbled and the God we thought we knew has disappeared. On my recent trip to Tennessee I had lunch with an old friend. We attended a Baptist high school together and bought into most of the accompanying conservative theology. Each of us eventually watched our Evangelical beliefs crumble. I was fortunate in going through this process because I was in seminary surrounded by friends experiencing a similar theological revolution. We had caring professors to help us build new foundations of faith to meet our fresh spiritual insights.

My friend was not so fortunate. She was in the working world with very little spiritual support. Theologically she drifted and felt like a lost soul. Eventually she got married to a guy who believed even less than she did. When children came along my friend's family began attending an Episcopal church so that their children would have some religious education. Surprisingly, her husband

who hardly even believed in God at all found his faith renewed and became very involved in the life of the church. My friend benefited from the sense of community the church provided, as well as strongly supporting the church's social teachings and outreach programs. In our recent conversation she said that for a long time she didn't really believe anything much but now at least her faith was hanging on by a thread. I am proud of her for trying and not giving up on the spiritual life. Despite the emptiness she often felt and the many ways God did not make sense to her, my friend has not given up on God. My hope is that her thread of faith will grow into a strong lifeline to hold her firmly in the years to come.

It's such a shame when theology becomes a stumbling block for people. I've always contended that ethics trumps theology, that how we live and the way we treat others is more important than the specifics of our beliefs about God. This is not to say that our theology, our beliefs about God are unimportant, for what we believe should affect how we behave.

Take today's scripture for instance. It can be interpreted any number of ways with real implications for the worship and work of the church. In this controversial passage Jesus says if we want eternal life we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. If all this flesh and blood talk sounds a bit cannibalistic to you, you're not alone. Enemies of the early Christians sometimes accused them of being cannibals. After all, whenever they met for worship these Christians talked about eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood.

What do we do with a passage like this? We must keep in mind that the Book of John was written from a particular perspective to people in a specific situation. Roman Catholics, who have a significantly higher view of

Communion than Protestants like us, point to this passage as proof that taking the bread and the wine is in some sense salvific. From our perspective as liberal Mainline Protestants, heirs of the Reformed tradition and its emphasis on faith over sacraments, the passage must mean something different.

For us, thinking about the flesh and blood of Jesus can be a reminder of Christ's humanity. He wasn't some magical spirit-man without real flesh and bones. On the contrary, he was as human as any of us, yet so connected to God that people saw in Jesus what John A. T. Robinson called the "human face of God." Meditating on Christ's flesh and blood, feeding our souls on the reality of God's life expressed through the life of Jesus in the miracle of the incarnation, can be another way of interpreting this passage. And if we follow Christ and live as he lived, believing as much and trusting as much as we dare, God's Spirit gives us a spiritual connection to Jesus who once walked this earth, flesh and blood like all the rest of us.

Throughout his life Jesus faced plenty of stumbling blocks and roadblocks. His life was a rocky road if there ever was one—King Herod trying to kill the Christ child, people rejecting Jesus and his teachings, being betrayed by a close friend, a falsely charged man of peace suffering a violent death. All of this changed when the rock meant to hold his body in the tomb forever instead rolled away like a marble to reveal God's greatest miracle of all—the resurrection—a dead and broken body transformed into a living, eternal creation never to suffer or die again.

Such is our hope as we face our own stumbling blocks and roadblocks. As people of faith we believe that God helps us when life's road gets rocky. And should a boulder the size of a house crash down on the road in front of us, we can trust God to take us by the hand and lead us on by

another way, perhaps even Robert Frost's road less traveled. In the end all roads do not lead to Rome. No, in the end life's roads take us somewhere far better. They take us home where we will meet Jesus face to face. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, in whom we live and move and have our being, we ask your help as we travel the road of life. When stumbling blocks trip us up and make us fall, encourage us to get back up and try again and again. When roadblocks stop us and we freeze in our tracks, take our hands and lead us on a divine detour with you. Thank you for the gift of your Spirit, ever near, always loving. Help us be loving all our days. Through Jesus Christ the Way, the Truth, and the Life we pray. AMEN.