10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.1.21

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

John 6:24-35
So 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, "Sir, 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. (584)

Aura, the aura of an object: Walter Benjamin, a 20th century philosopher, did a lot to develop this idea. He was concerned about the mind and imagination of "modern man." He developed the idea of aura most influentially in an essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Modern man: here's what had made him. The industrial revolution had moved people's livelihoods from farms to factories. Urbanization had seen people themselves move from homesteads to cities. Technological innovation enabled for the reproducibility of objects and art. This removed such things from the hands of their creators, artisans and craftspeople, put it into the hands of manufacturers, capitalists. Objects proliferated. Kitsch came to be, those things made for everyone, made by no one. They have no origin and their end is everywhere. And they have no point: they are false signifiers of things that don't exist, or don't exist at least as represented. Those plastic flowers that are "too perfect"? Those paintings of cottages and brooks and little bridges that bear so sign of actual human presence?

For all this and more, Benjamin was concerned with the mind and imagination of modern man, that it had been dislocated and commodified, become cheap and literal and objectified.

Aura was a concept he developed to name what he thought was being lost. The aura of a thing. The quality that gives it life.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." This he wrote in 1935 in his home country, Germany, when the Nazis were taking over, those great lovers of kitsch. They figured out (true Fascists that they were) that there was political power to be gained in mass-made "artifacts"—Hitler's little face fashioned into teapots and stamped on paperweights, swastika-shaped ashtrays or it stamped on decanters; military and party bosses with ribbons and metals denoting some favor but not won by any actual means. By these, they could create a whole national myth, the German people ancient and heroic, pure and powerful.

False. The whole thing. Fascism is when advanced technology meets primitive myth-making.

"Aura." It's imbued when the craftsperson lays hands on the work of craft coming to be. "Aura." It decays when objects are more and more produced, reproduced.

I wonder if Benjamin took any flak for this notion. It's a little out there.

Aura has Latin roots, and it suggests breeze or breath. By it, Benjamin meant to name the "strange web of space and time" in which an object finds its context and meaning. He meant it to name "a distance as close as can be." What's more, objects with aura might even inspire a sense of awe given their unique existence at the place where they happen to be.

One day, a few years ago now, I crossed paths with an artist whom I knew in Stockbridge. Outside the library there, I was sitting on a bench, and he happened along. He was in paint-spattered clothing, the only kind I think he had. He looked like he was floating as he moved toward me.

He explained, he was just back from a trip he'd made to Italy. He'd just seen all these works of art in their original contexts. As painter a few years older than I, he'd spent his life studying these classic works. He knew them well, every brushstroke and subtlety of color. For the first time, though, he'd seen them in their original contexts, in churches and chapels, in villas and marketplaces hither and yon across the Italian countryside. You walk into a little by-way place, and you're confronted with such timeless astonishing beauty that you're embarrassed by it, caught off guard.

It had him in a state of awe, even still, right there outside Elm Street Market.

He wasn't religious, I was fairly certain. He'd always come to art from a place that Benjamin might understand as exhibit rather than practice. Art was a class of things intended for exhibition rather than ritual. You were to see it, maybe appreciate it, maybe even love it, but hardly to organize your life around it, hardly to organize your day around it.

But to see works of art not in museums, to see them in churches or chapels or ancient settings: it seemed to have deepened an already deep experience for him, and damn if his face wasn't still glowing from it all.

The crowd had come to Jesus for bread as a sort of exhibition, something once done and now done again, a trick he could reproduce, and reproduce, and then again!

He had intended the bread as a ritual, as something the people would participate in and as something more immediate as regards the presence of God. By him, this bread was something whose distance between food and truth was as close as could be.

The crowd though wanted more of a snack, if a very, very reassuring snack. Never to worry about where their next meal was coming from: now *that* would be wonderful! Never to have to labor for food, for sustenance, for *survival*: yes, please!

This meal, though, as Jesus had offered that one time not long before this coming of the crowd was to be a sign, a signifier of the truly to-be-signified—God, the presence of God, the breath of life which is God. He'd intended the bread to be sign rather than spectacle, or (worse) as mere object absent aura. This wasn't just to get some calories into the body. It was to fill the body and whole being with life, as it itself was, he himself, as bread filled with life.

But here came the crowd: popcorn with their movie. "You're looking for me, not because you saw signs. No, really, you're looking for me just because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Meanwhile, here's how he saw it: "I am the bread of life."

It's easy to hear this as asserting something exclusive about Jesus—that Jesus is the bread of life in a way that other people aren't, that Jesus is the bread of life in a way that other religious

personas aren't. It's easy then to hear this as asserting something exclusive about Christianity—that here is a true religion in contrast to all those other religions that are false.

A closer consideration suggests something else altogether. In Jesus saying, "I am…" he isn't saying something about himself, he's saying something about God. This gospel narrative, John's gospel narrative, is full of "I am…" statements, Jesus saying "I am…" about all sorts of things. "I am the true vine." "I am the living water." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Each of these is less to say something about Jesus the person, Jesus the religious figure, is more to say something about God.

"I Am" is, after all, the name by which God named Godself way back in mythic time. Spoken to Moses from the burning bush—the bush that burned though was never consumed, and as such is the very image of being, sustained being—there came the voice when Moses had asked, "What is your name? Whom shall I say sent me? What is your name?"

"I Am," or YHWH, which is to say breath, which is literally to pronounce the sound of breath.

YHWH.

It's translated, "I AM," or "I am that I am," or "I am that I shall be," which is to say being. Here is the being by which all beings come to have their being. Here is the being who donates to all subsequent beings their beingness, their existence, their breath, their aura—things created, crafted, loved.

Jesus identified with this fundamental being. Jesus, in fact, according to John, was the very presence of this fundamental being—this thing from before time upon which is founded all time and all history, and who also came into time to act in history, Jesus Christ, begotten of God. To believe in him is to participate in his life, which is the sum total of the work we're to do, the sum total of the true human being's work, to participate in his life which is true life.

But the crowd had come not to eat of this true bread, to join up with this deeply given existence. They'd come as if to have a snack with a show, popcorn at the movies (which I say as one who enjoys popcorn at the movies). That cool trick by which they all ate—five thousand people and probably more, of five barley loaves and two fish: they'd seen him do it before, they wanted to see him do it again, and they'd come in search of that. They were sort of hungry, after all.

There'd been confusion as to where Jesus was though. The disciples had gone in a boat to Capernaum, and the crowd thought he'd gone with him. But he wasn't in the boat with them; not according to the story. He was instead seen walking on the water, water that had become rough in a

storm. The disciples tried then to get him into the boat, but as soon as they did that, they found themselves safe on the other side, and Jesus wasn't with them.

It's not clear where he was.

But when the crowd realized he was neither where he'd fed them, nor had he gone in the boat with the disciples to the other side of the sea, they went off in search of him.

They found him Capernaum, though they were still unsure of how he'd come here. "Rabbi, when did you come here?" a question he never answered because it's not clear on what time scale they were asking it. John is a very ironic gospel. Everything has a literal meaning, which the characters of the gospel act within, and then a much deeper meaning, which both Jesus and the readers have a knowing of. And when you're dealing with so truly transcendent a being as Jesus was and is, and which both Jesus and the readers know ourselves to be dealing with, transcendent though also imminent, it's hard know exactly the answer: "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

"When did I come to be here? Either a little while ago or before the beginning of the created order."

Instead, he simply said, "You're looking for me, not because you saw signs. No, really, you're looking for me just because you ate your fill of the loaves."

I think it's important that the food the Israelites found in the wilderness wasn't, apparently, literal loaves of bread fallen from heaven. Though the Lord had promised as much: "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you," what actually arrived was something far less out of context than bread falling from the sky. ("Heads up!") What arrives was far more integrated into the context, the ecological context. "When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground."

It's supposed this might be secretion from insects, their active nightlives leaving this residue in the morning. Turns out, much of the insect world makes for good sustenance. I'm personally not there yet, but word is cricket flour makes for pretty good eating, pretty good baking. Likewise, it's supposed this flaky substance was—something plentiful in what might otherwise seem a lifeless environment. They simply had to gain eyes to see it.

They also had to trust, as this flaky substance didn't store well, it moldered. It would come to mold, or to nothing, if they tried to store it up.

But why should they since, apparently, it arrived every morning, reliably, reliably.

Here it is again.

They just had to trust.

What if the presence of God isn't like loaves of bread falling the sky? Spectacular! Surprising! (Heads up!) What if the presence of God is more like morning dew? Reliable, and all around us, arriving in time, always simply arriving in time, if only we have eyes to see.

When the Israelites saw it, of course, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

Funny thing: the word for "what is it" is manna. Manna, a Hebrew word: you thought it meant bread, right? It actually means "what is it," this thing that functions as bread but is also much more than bread, and admittedly less. Flaky substance that sustains, a thin, reliable reminder that God is, and that God is with us.

The fact is that life these days is cluttered with objects whose aura is decayed a bit, or a lot. We're so advanced in the age of mechanical reproduction that authentic objects in their original context put to their true purpose are as rare can be. I'm convinced this is why people will organize whole gardens around rocks slowly unearthing themselves on their property—as if, "Here is an object neither produced nor bought, but simply here by means other than human will and passing desire." And so they plant whole gardens around such rocks, rocks as altars, ancient and true. I love these gardens. I even thought about installing one around a rock we found unearthing itself in our back yard. We're so far into this age of kitsch that to search out the authentic could make for a whole life's work.

And so it is to be.

I think the church can offer this to people. I think *this* church can offer this to people, might indeed be what brought you here this morning or keeps bringing you back—the authentic, the true, the presence of the true and timeless, that which is worthy of devotion. Our objects in our worship space: few of these have come to be among us by utter authenticity—not as Michelangelo made for the Sistine Chapel or as van Eych made for the altar in Ghent.

But there is the labyrinth in the chapel of Church on the Hill, which Barbara is creating and Jenn is assisting with. And there are the paraments Emily made for the pulpit. And there are the masks Arthur made for us that we might safely gather.

As for the objects that have been manufactured, they do though, many of them, have an origin that we might hold in mind, and a purpose to which we put each in time: the creche set at Christmas, the chalice for when we perform Communion, the cross made central for the purpose of our mediation on the saving quality of self-giving love—acts of self-giving love performed in time by the likes of us, the ultimate act of self-giving love performed evermore by a God who takes on

our rage and our desperation in taking on from us our crucifying ways, and returns to us complete and perfect love, offers back to us complete and perfect peace.

These objects are not the literal thing themselves. They are a re-presence. But the truer the sign, the closer the presence. The plain meetinghouse in which we gather is one take on New England's expression of the possibility of God.

Our plain meetinghouses are New England's expression of, and making way for, the possibility of God.

There's a trend in the struggling church to discount these places as but drains—drains on our ministries, drains on our time and our treasure. I don't see it that way, as you might well guess. Our meetinghouses are gifts for ministry, not drains on our ministry. Every time we open our doors for people to come in, we open a way for the possibility of God, the possibility of true presence. I'm convinced people still want this, will still, as that long ago crowd, even seek it out. Truly, in a world cluttered with the false, this is ministry in a most ultimate sense.

So, come in, come close—for we might just here encounter something beautiful, something true.

Thanks be to God.