“How Now, Chop Logic!”
(#6 in the “Living in the Thin Places” Epiphany series)

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’?”  
(John 6:41-42)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 7th Sunday after Epiphany, February 23, 2014  
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During Epiphany we’ve been focusing on the early portion of John’s gospel, gliding  
chapter by chapter, witnessing the light shining ever brighter as the story of Jesus’ life  
and ministry unfolds. We’ve been making our way toward Transfiguration Sunday,  
Epiphany’s pinnacle, when Jesus ascends the Galilean mountain and shines with divine  
glory, his three disciples filled with wonder. Transfiguration is next Sunday, so this will  
be our last visit to John’s gospel, since only the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and  
Luke describe the Transfiguration.

In this 6th message of our series we’ve arrived at the 6th chapter, the Feeding of the  
Multitude. Our focus this morning, though, will not be on the miracle itself, but on Jesus’  
consequent teaching, his claims to be the Bread of Life come down from God, a claim  
provoking so much discomfort that there was an exodus, many of the early disciples went  
back “and walked with him no more.”

The theme of our series has been Living in the Thin Places, the term Thin Place deriving  
from a 5th century Celtic tradition describing certain spots as uniquely holy, a place where  
one might be unusually aware of and “in touch” with God. The adjective “Thin”  
imagines a veil separating our physical reality from a deeper reality of the spirit which  
can be, in certain spots, delicate and porous, allowing this Other reality to seep through to  
one’s awareness. Thin Place experiences are those moments when we sense that we were  
not made for this world alone, that there is Something More for which we are created,  
Something More compounded within the human molecule than merely a scientifically  
ascertainable genetic code riding the double helix of our DNA.

Some such experiences are eagerly sought, as Nicodemus in Chapter 3 who came to Jesus  
by night seeking light, but many Thin Place moments are entirely unsought, serendipity,  
surprising gifts breaking into the ordinary such as the man at the Pool of Bethesda we  
heard about last Sunday. Sought or unsought, one’s meeting of Jesus can become a Taste  
of Heaven.
In John 6 many tasted as Jesus feeds the multitude, a miracle recorded by all four gospel writers. John, though, elaborates as no other gospel writer, a narrative filling a long chapter (671 verses, John’s longest chapter). Our emphasis today is not the miracle itself, but what happens the Next Day when the crowds find Jesus and he teaches that he is “The bread of God come down from heaven to give life to the world.”

The Jews begin to complain because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” saying, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? HOW can he NOW say, I have come down from heaven?”

How Now! This has been a Shakespeare kind-of-month for me. I went back and read parts of Romeo and Juliet. Perhaps it was a Valentine’s Day mood or, more likely, beginning to want a taste of England, knowing in five months I’ll have an opportunity to visit Shakespeare’s home, Stratford-upon-Avon.

So when the Jews said to Jesus, “How Now can you say you have come from heaven”), it reminded me of one of my favorite Shakespearean phrases, “How Now! Chop Logic!” How Now! was an expression of surprise, ranging from the mild surprise of a common greeting to disgusted disbelief. To greet someone with “How Now?” was the Elizabethan way of saying, “What’s Up?” (I wonder, BTW, since Shakespeare died in 1616, almost 400 years ago, how our curious phrase, “What’s Up?” will look 400 years from now? I can imagine a pastor taking that archaic phrase and its contraction, “Tsup?” as a sermon title that will look as curious then as “How Now?” looks to us today!

“How Now!” was also used more emphatically, to confront someone. One might say, “How Now!” as a way to say, “What’s Up . . . With THIS!”

Several years ago I transformed our Wednesday night service into a Shakespearean stage. Under my direction I gathered a willing and energetic troupe of actors and actresses to re-enact Romeo and Juliet’s Act 3, Scene 5. It the scene when Capulet confronts his 13 year old daughter, Juliet, after Lady Capulet reported Juliet’s emphatic unwillingness to go through with an arranged marriage at St. Peter’s Church a mere 3 days hence. No wonder, since she has fallen in love with Romeo of the despised Montagues. When Capulet is informed of this by Lady Capulet, Capulet storms into his daughter Juliet’s chamber. Angered at his daughter’s refusal, Capulet says to his daughter Juliet, “How Now, How Now, Chop Logic! What is this?”

Chop Logic means irrational thought. “You’re not thinking straight! You’re logic is choppy! You don’t see the whole picture, Juliet! Leave it to your dad to think for you, my child! You’ve chopped logic into bits and you’re not putting all the pieces together! I see the whole picture! I know my family and its needs!”

So there’s your Shakespearean twist as to what the Jews are saying to Jesus. “Is this not Jesus, son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? ‘How Now’ does he say he has come from heaven!” It’s as if they are saying, “How Now, Chop Logic! What is this?
Jesus, you don’t see the whole picture! You’re forgetting some vital pieces of logic – we know your family!”

At that point in the debate, the Jews divert the subject to manna in the wilderness, hoping their reference to Moses might humble Jesus into a retraction. It doesn’t. In fact, his claims become bolder. “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.”

Is My Flesh! With those words the Difficult-Saying Meter rockets off the chart. Shocked, the people wonder, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” At the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus teaches, “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.”

So offensive is this saying that John tells us some of his own disciples can’t accept it, so they turn back and walk with him no more. When Jesus asks the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter replies, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

C. S. Lewis, in "Mere Christianity," writes to those who see in Jesus a great moral teacher but not the Son of God. "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg -- or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.”

Surely some, hearing Jesus say, “my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink,” are willing to embrace the lunatic option. “How Now! Chop Logic! What Is This!”

Well, in Shakespearean spirit, perhaps you’ll allow me to play a role:

Let me introduce myself to St. James Church. You know me, I think, because you read the bible. I am in the bible. Well, not actually my name. Still, I’m there. My name is not important, but my story is. You see, I was there in the Galilee. I saw the multitude fed by Jesus, even ate some of the bread myself, but not the fish, honestly, since I prefer pizza to fish. Well, you call it pizza, we called it pita, but it’s the same word.

By the way, I am a baker myself. I know bread, know where it comes from, and it’s not from heaven, but from the earth. I was born in Magdala, only a few miles from here, but I was one of the first Jews who moved south about 6 miles to the brand new city Herod built called Tiberias. My bakery is flourishing there, in that mostly-Roman city.
Well, we all heard about Jesus, the many he was making well who had been sick. So I went with some of my fishermen friends in a boat from Tiberias to find Jesus. The day was so incredible that we decided not to go back to Tiberias.

We found him in Capernaum the next day, listening intently to every word he spoke. But his sayings were hard. Many were there from Nazareth, which is barely 20 miles away. Some I spoke with had known him as a child. I had not, though my brother had run across his brother once.

Even that knowledge of his family, meager though it was, was enough for me, so I nodded to the whispered logic that he had to be a bit off, a man saying crazy things about where bread came from. Where HE came from! Heaven! Heaven? Heavens No! He hailed from Nazareth. So we said, “How Now can he say he came down from heaven!”

I thought he had taken it too far. Why, it was almost as though Jesus was saying that he was God himself, a repugnant idea to any Jew. And HE was a Jew! How Now! What’s This?

When he said that to have God in us, to live forever, we needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood, well, it was over the top. You can see that, surely? The thought violates every idea sacred to me as a Jewish person.

So we went back home, ended this Messiah-quest road trip. We weren’t alone. You should have seen the people turning to leave, the boats filling the Sea, like one of your 4th of July fireworks shows on the water. Like me, they couldn’t put all the pieces together. His words were “Chop Logic!”

As I was walking toward the boat I heard him say to Peter, “will you, too, go? And I heard Peter almost shout that he was staying.” Brave man, that Peter. A very brave man, but also loud. We liked Jesus, really believed he offered a message from God. But eating flesh and drinking blood? Sorry, can’t wrap my mind around that. So we left.

Oh, and by the way, that's where I’m mentioned in the Bible, in verse 66 (easy number to remember, isn’t it?) where it says, "Many of his disciples turned and walked with him no more."

Well, not “no more.” At least, not for me. There’s more to my story, you see. I went home, went back to my bakery. Ah, but I heard the stories. Never will I forget the day news came from Judea, from Jerusalem, that he had been betrayed by Judas and killed. I met Judas on that day by the sea, by the way. Did I tell you that? Judas was the disciple who served the part of the crowd where I was sitting. I’ll never forget the moment, as if time were standing still as he brought the bread and fish to me. As I said, I don’t like fish, so I kindly refused it, but I grasped the bread. I really, really grasped, the bread. I do every morning in my bakery. It’s
my life, grasping bread. But this was different. Where had it come from, this bread? THIS Bread?

Oh, but my point was, I really liked Judas. He was so kind that day and his eyes betrayed that he was as stunned as we were. We made eye contact and he smiled and I felt, included, fed, nourished. Not as I am day to day with the bread I serve in Tiberias. I felt nourished from heaven, by God.

It was Thick Bread for such a Thin Place.

If you had told me that day that Judas would betray his Lord, why, I would never have believed it, that he, too, would one day turn and walk away, hearing in Jesus’ words the same Chop Logic we heard.

Jesus, this Bread of Life, Crucified. How Now! His flesh broken, as I tore the bread from Judas’ hand that day when time stood still. When I heard the news from Jerusalem, time stood still . . . again. How . . . Now?

I heard Jesus hung between two thieves, still promising paradise even as he breathed his last. That night I prayed long, and I remembered what he had said, that “the bread he would give for the world was his flesh.” Somehow, it seemed that the pieces of Chop Logic were coming together! I began to understand that Jesus, himself, was the sacrifice. It was as though he had to die in order for me to live. Though I can’t explain it fully, somehow it seemed to all fit together.

Then the news, only three days later, that he was alive, that he walked out of the dark tomb. A few days later we heard reports that Jesus had come back to Galilee, had served breakfast to his disciples who had returned to their fishing, right near the spot where he had fed me that day! We heard that he asked Peter, the brave one, “Do you love me?” And, that when Peter affirmed his love, all three times Jesus said, “Feed my sheep! Which made sense when I heard that Peter had denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was arrested by the Romans. Imagine that. The fisherman is now the shepherd.

So, I thought, if he would take Peter back, perhaps he will take me back. I was a disciple who turned away. I admit it. But, I’ve come back. “How Now!” you say? Well, I’ve come back because I remember Jesus saying on that day (the very day I walked away), “Anyone who comes to me, I will never cast out.”

I blew one chance at being a disciple. I won’t make that mistake again. The world may think it Chop Logic, but I believe. “How Now!”