

Sermon - Proper 15, Year B
The Story of the Bread
8/18/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past week, I began reading a new novel that takes place within the mythical historical world of the legends of King Arthur. The book is called *The Bright Sword* by Lev Grossman, and it is a 700-page epic featuring many of the personages of the King Arthur stories. The main character is a young man, Collum, who comes from the Isle of Mull – the Out Isles. He is an orphan, raised in the abusive home of a local landowner who treats him as little more than an inconvenient animal. Throughout his childhood, the only thing that keeps him alive – the only thing that even permits him to believe in God – are the stories of the famed good King Arthur and the knights of the round table in Camelot. As terrible as things seem, the world cannot be hopeless, it cannot be irredeemable, as long as brave, good, magnanimous Arthur is on the throne and the knights serve with courage and fearlessness – somehow, somewhere in the kingdom.

These stories keep Collum living.

Collum resolves to survive his horrific circumstances to become the best fighter that he can be. He will escape, he will travel to Camelot, and he will petition the good knights to test him and, God willing, permit him a seat around that famously round table. At the age of seventeen, he leaves his tiny island for the first time. He travels through woodlands and over the ruins of ancient Roman roads, dodging thieves and choking down loneliness. And after the arduous journey, he finally - at last! - arrives in Camelot, ready to begin this, his new, vibrant life! Only to find that the King is dead. Arthur has been killed, just two weeks ago, along with most of the knights of the round table. Camelot has been abandoned. There are just a handful of old soldiers and the most hapless of the knights remaining. The chivalry, the goodness, the hope

– all of it has departed with the king. And everything that has kept Collum alive for seventeen years has died.

The rest of the book is about the death of one story and the rebirth of another. It is about what Camelot was, and what it might become – now, in a reality in which even a brave and good man cannot escape death. It is about the way we tell each other stories about what life is and what we have been brought to earth to accomplish together. It is about the stories that keep us alive.

As we have been reading from the Gospel of John in church together for the past four weeks, you may have had a moment of wondering whether or not someone, somewhere along the line, has made a mistake in the printing of the readings. In this lectionary cycle, we read about Jesus calling himself the bread of life for five weeks in a row. Five weeks of bread. Five weeks of Jesus speaking of his flesh as true food and his blood as true drink. “The one who eats this bread will live forever.” This is an interesting challenge as a preacher, as one arrives at the fourth week and thinks, “what else could one possibly say about bread?” or... “Hm, let’s see what the Old Testament is up to this week.” **But there is a reason that we keep telling this story about bread. It’s because Jesus does.** Jesus himself keeps telling this story, to his disciples, to the crowds, and to those who persecute him, again and again he proclaims: “I am the bread of life.” This is no fairy story or pious legend. **This is the story that keeps us alive.**

There are plenty of other stories floating around out there in the primordial soup of the created world. There are the stories we inherit from our country or our family. There are the stories we learn from books or our teachers. There are the stories, too, from the shadow sides of our own minds. There seems to be so many stories sometimes that it can be difficult to keep them all straight. Am I the hero? Am I supposed to be? Am I good, or am I evil? Do the things I

work for matter? Is my neighbor my ally or my enemy? Who wins? Who loses? Who deserves it? What do I deserve?

We tell ourselves stories all the time, and it is often the case that we've been telling the wrong ones. We arrive in Camelot to find that King Arthur has died. So what on earth are we supposed to do now?

“I am 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.” Jesus gives us his story. He tells it – again and again – the only story that will in fact keep us living. This is the story from the very beginning, the story that God has told since the horizon of creation: **God made you, God loves you, God forgives you, and you can always come home.** God gave you a heart to seek Him, and a body that, no matter its difficulties, will someday show you what it is to know Resurrection. God gave you hunger for bread and companionship, and a thirst for meaning and for beauty. God gives you his Son, the Bread of Life, and a seat – forever – around his eternal round table. He gives us a Feast without end, a food that never dies, and this is the story that keeps us living.

We tell the part about the bread for five weeks in church, because this is how the good stories work. We share them together. We repeat them on the good days and on the bad. This is the story that holds us fast, even when the others appear to end in death. **Tell it again.** It is the story that gives us life.