

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

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*XII Pentecost, John 6:51-58*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven ...*

The TED talk begins: “My name is Ben Saunders, and I specialize in dragging heavy things around cold places.”<sup>i</sup>

See, on March 5, 2004, a Russian helicopter dropped the English explorer onto the ice floes of the Arctic Ocean. And 67 days later he reached the North Pole, alone and unsupported.

He explains, “On May 11, I stood alone there [at 90-even on the GPS]. I was the only human being in an area one-and-a-half-times [that of the United States] ... More than 2,000 people have climbed Everest. Twelve people have stood on the moon. Including me, only four people have skied solo to the North Pole.”<sup>ii</sup>

He continues, “the thing that [has fascinated] me about [this singular point on the globe] is that it is slap-bang in the middle of the sea ... [and] to reach it, you’ve got to ski literally over the frozen crust, the floating skin of ice on the Arctic Ocean.”<sup>iii</sup>

See, “It’s not, like, one big ice cap,” Saunders explains. “It’s lots and lots of sheets of ice, some of them miles across, some of them just a few feet across. [And] It’s always moving, always drifting ... And, chances are, if you’re having a bad day, the ice starts [moving against you].”<sup>iv</sup> Saunders names *this* dynamic “negative drift”... *negative drift*.

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You may recall, that Chapter Six of John’s Gospel begins with Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand, after which, “When the people saw the [miracle that he had performed], they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’ [And] when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew.”<sup>v</sup>

Thereafter, Jesus throws miracle upon miracle and walks on water, at first frightening the disciples during a storm on the lake. Jesus memorably reassures them, “‘It is I; do not be afraid.’” And, again, following his performance of a miracle, they wanted to *take* him, this time into their boat. Yet, Jesus and their craft “reached the land towards which they were going,” the scripture records, and they could not.<sup>vi</sup>

Now, despite Jesus' and the disciples' crossing of the sea, the crowds continue their pursuit of this miracle-working teacher, making their way double-time by foot around the water. Playing nonchalant their encounter there, on the other side they ask, *Oh, hey*, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"<sup>vii</sup> Jesus sees through their stage play and calls them out: "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs [of God's loving work in the world], but because you ate your fill of the loaves."<sup>viii</sup>

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven ...*

Ben Saunders continues: "The pack ice is always drifting. I was skiing into headwinds for nine of the ten weeks I was alone ... and I was drifting backwards most of the time. My record was minus 2.5 miles. [That is,] I got up in the morning, took the tent down, skied north for seven-and-a-half hours, put the tent up, and [when I checked the GPS,] I was two-and-a-half miles further back than when I started [the day]. I literally couldn't keep up with the drift of the ice[, not even close]."

Imagine: the very ground beneath Saunders' feet constantly – though imperceptibly – moved against him. He would spend all day slogging and "man-hauling"<sup>ix</sup> massive sleds through impossibly difficult conditions, only to learn that because of *negative drift*, he actually lost ground rather than gained it. Yet when he realized the lengths he had conceded to this movement beyond his immediate control, *he* gathered his gear, and *he* kept going.

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven ...*

As foreshadowed in the Evangelist's note regarding the crowd's intention "to take" Jesus and make him a king and then reiterated in the disciples' effort "to take" Jesus into the boat and make his "magic" their own, Jesus employs the "bread of life" metaphor to challenge the peoples' desires: *Do not allow yourselves to be distracted by the earthly shimmer of our time together: recognize the **greater** gift I offer, "that you believe in [me,] whom [God] has sent," that – together – we would share good news for this aching world, for our loving Creator's vision endures, even now ... especially now.*<sup>x</sup>

However (and not so unexpectedly, given us humans), the people reject Jesus' appeal. The hometown crowd who has come to see Jesus seeks to discredit him and all his optimism, grumbling, "Is not this ... the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven,'" *we know he came from just down the block.*<sup>xi</sup> In response to their derision, he offers the declaration that begins this morning's appointment: "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.*"<sup>xii</sup>

Facing the negative drift of their attempts to “take” him for themselves, Jesus does not yield to the crowds’ and disciples’ short-sightedness. Bracing in the headwinds of their cynicism and hard-heartedness, Jesus does not yield to his hometown neighbors, friends, and family who undermine him. And carried backward on these floes of selfishness and self-righteousness, Jesus does not yield to the Temple leaders who work yet another angle against him and protest his metaphors: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Predictably now – having made our way with Jesus through this chapter, rather than retreating, Jesus man-hauls God’s Good News through these icy conditions, pushing his message further toward hyperbole – to the brink of what sounds like cannibalism: “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.”<sup>xiii</sup> Brothers and sisters, share in me, and together we will live, live for the life of the world!

And two verses after today’s Gospel concludes, the flustered disciples announce, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”<sup>xiv</sup>

Concluding his TED talk, Ben Saunders admits, “I have a school report[ card]. I [received it when I] was thirteen-years-old, and it’s [now] framed above my desk at home. It says, “Ben lacks sufficient impetus to achieve anything worthwhile.”<sup>xv</sup>

He continues, “I think if I’ve learned anything, it’s this: that no one else is the authority on your potential. You’re the only person that decides how far you go and what your capable of.”

Trinitarians, what a long year – long decades, long centuries, long millennia – we and our Third Rock companions have endured! Even when we as individuals have done our faithful part – worn our masks and received our vaccinations ... labored for equity and for inclusion ... said our prayers and made our Communion ... the ground moves against us. Seemingly, we awake to a world worse than the one to which we bid good night just the evening before.

Cataloguing all these forces, worldly despair tempts us, woos us, seeks to take *us* into ranks with those short-sighted crowds and cynical neighbors, the hard-hearted and the self-obsessed who dare not believe in the potential of Beloved Community.

Well, against all these icy conditions, we at Trinity Church in the City of Boston pack up our tents and gather on these Sunday mornings ... we remain humble, focusing on what we can do, rather than grieving what we cannot ... we remain hopeful, believing the loving God who created us and all that is – the God who is ever Faithful and declares us beloved .... and with a Grace beyond the limits of our vision, **we become living bread for the world!** Living bread come down from heaven, that all might live forever.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Saunders, Ben. [“Why Did I Ski To The North Pole?”](#) *ted.com*. February, 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Lewis, Sarah. *The Rise*. Simon & Schuster. New York, New York. 2014. Lewis introduced me to Saunders. She interviewed the explorer and shares her impressions in *The Rise*, one of those books that has 792 sermons in it.

<sup>v</sup> John 6:14-15.

<sup>vi</sup> John 6:20-21.

<sup>vii</sup> John 6:25.

<sup>viii</sup> John 6:26-27.

<sup>ix</sup> In a TED Talk discussing his later expedition to the South Pole, Saunders uses Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s chosen language to describe Scott’s 1910 team’s dragging of their provisions. I repeat that verb – “man-hauling” – here and once more in this sermon. I believe Annie Dillard also uses the term in her reflection on Scott.

<sup>x</sup> John 6:29.

<sup>xi</sup> John 6:42.

<sup>xii</sup> John 6:51.

<sup>xiii</sup> John 6:54-55.

<sup>xiv</sup> John 6:60.

<sup>xv</sup> Saunders.