

(The stories of Jesus in the gospel of John including his statements about bread and the "I am" statements can lead us into some of the deeper esoteric spiritual traditions that also existed before and during the life of Jesus and had influence on the beliefs of the growing number of Christians. The gospel of Thomas is an example of this and this connection is easily made through the gospel of John.)

Today's reading continues a train of thought
that we have looked at for three Sundays now -
about bread – about the "manna" that was eaten in the wilderness.

Stories about food – would be powerful stories to remember – good teaching stories.

Think about what it's like when you are hungry.

Stories that attach to the visceral experience of hunger –
would be stories that would have some power – be good ones for image and metaphor.

Maybe it's why we have them.

Now that we have been on this topic awhile – I would like to take it up a notch.

Is that all right?



This writing of John is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

They have stories of Jesus birth and a little about his family – or his origins.

Not much about it in John.

The Jesus John writes about is more mysterious – more mystical –
as if from the beginning of time – or logos.

John has the "I am" statements.

These introduce us to the idea - that God –
was for many – even at that time - a verb – the "to be" verb –
which rings very true to me.

The gospel first appeared around AD 90 to 100.



Let's spend a little time with the story -
and then I want to move on to where I think it leads us.
It was a visit to a village – probably not far from his home town.
Jesus is attempting to offer a new level of teaching – a re-imagined world -

He is asking listeners to re-imagine their world and he uses a familiar metaphor.

The language is poetic and imaginative.



John gives us a window into some ancient spiritual traditions – often called mystery traditions.

John the Baptist came out of an ancient tradition – his Essene community.

But there were a number of these communities.

The Gospel of John represents – at least to some extent – a Gnostic tradition -
an ancient tradition whose beliefs were that there was a kind of hidden knowledge
that one comes to through study and spiritual practice.

The early Roman church considered these groups to be heretical -
and did about anything they could to discredit them.

So – it is pretty amazing that we have the Gospel of John accepted into the canon.



There is another gospel that is similar to John.

It has been around as long – if not longer.

But it did not make it into the canon -

the canon being the biblical materials that make up the Old and New Testaments.

This is the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Anyone read the *Gospel of Thomas*?

It would be a great study one of these days.

The *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered in 1947 among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in Egypt.

These are the scrolls that were found in an ancient clay jar

at the base of a cliff along the Nile River by a young Arab shepherd.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is probably the best known of the scrolls found there.

It might well be the earliest record of anything that Jesus said.



So what is the *Gospel of Thomas*?

It is a collection of short – succinct – sayings – attributed to Jesus.

Some are found in the other gospels.

About half these sayings are not found in any other gospel.

The *Gospel of Thomas* has no stories of Jesus' life -
and no crucifixion and resurrection stories.

So – why might Thomas be important?

It helps us understand that there was more than one tradition - and how they are different.

The largest community – or tradition – includes the churches tied to Paul –
and his experience of Jesus.

This is predominant in our New Testament.

But there were other Christian churches and groups of believers –
namely the Gnostic churches and writings.

So, there was not just one early version of Christianity.

There were many – and this is one.

Acknowledgement of that reality was a long time in coming from the Roman church.

The early church did not want it to be discussed.

The Gospel of John has some of the Gnostic characteristics -
although it would not be called a Gnostic gospel.

Since we have been reading John for three weeks now -

I thought it was time to talk more about it.



So – what was Jesus like for these believers in the Gnostic churches?

He was a gifted teacher.

He taught a different intuitive way of knowing.

That new way of knowing was combining mind and heart in thinking about –
in experiencing God.

It was about discovering the divine within the person – and that is more like we do today.

They considered Jesus to be an embodiment of the divine who became incarnate -
but they did not call him messiah or Son of God.

And yet - the Jesus that is reflected in their writings – their Gnostic gospels -
responds to very concrete questions of life – like -

What is the world like?

What are people like?

What is wisdom?

What will happen in the future?

For them the idea of “salvation” had nothing to do with Jesus dying for the sins of the world.

“Salvation” meant understanding Jesus – knowing what he knew -
understanding his words – as deep and intuitive insights.

These followers were trying to make their way through the mysteries and questions of life -
and Jesus was their teacher – their mentor – their role model.

Because we have almost always studied the writings of the New Testament
related to the letters of Paul – we get another picture.

That picture has traditionally been what we have thought
was the only way to understand Jesus
and his life and his message.

In that traditional picture – God was totally other – and most certainly male.

Jesus was Son of God.

And Jesus’ death saved people (us) from what became known as “original sin.”

And the institution of the church – including clergy and a hierarchy of bishops -
and even the creeds and catechisms – functioned to guard the faith – so to speak.



The Gnostic gospels are different in how they portray it all.

In the *Gospel of Thomas* – and in the Gnostic communities of Christians -
there is divinity in each of us.

Salvation was about overcoming illusion – many call the process enlightenment.

We might say they pushed the theological boundaries -
and now they are pushed all the time – at least among us Protestants –
and especially we Methodists.



What can we learn from the *Gospel of Thomas* that can help us with our reading in John?

It can help us know the community.

We can know more of why some were very critical –
and some were drawn even more to Jesus.

For example, the Thomas community seemed to be organized
around shared learning – mutual learning.
They were deeply committed to knowledge of self and the world.

Where else in our society can we ask questions about the meaning of life?
Where else can we talk about the teachings of Jesus and what it means for our actions?

Where else do we seriously deal with the difficult issues of our day?
War – terrorism – immigration – environment – when life begins or ends
Hopefully in doing so – we become more deeply committed to being good people –
moral people – compassionate people.

It seems to me to be at the heart of being a spiritual community today.

We pay attention to social issues and try to educate ourselves.

We work to further causes for justice and peace
and the welfare of our fellow human beings.

We reach out to others –
and we give our time and talent and financial support to worthy causes.

So – how is that different from the early traditional Christian communities?

A lot of it would be similar.

But for today – I am offering that it helps us understand better
– the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Jesus.

Our traditional gospels and the letters of Paul give a lot of attention to the idea
that God was in Jesus – and the way God was in Jesus.

God sacrificed a son – and that was to make up for our sins – our depravity.

His physical death and physical resurrection –
was to let us off the hook for being responsible for our behavior.

It may be traditional – and it may have been something early Christians –
and later Christians were taught to say in the early creeds.

But – I think it is irresponsible.

It describes a kind of God I would want nothing to do with.
What it does is tie the story back to Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.
And so it served a purpose in the forming of the early Roman church
because it connected the new story to the old story.

For a long time - this was not the only view and only way to be Christian.
And if we put our greatest focus on salvation – that our sins are forgiven because
of the death and resurrection of Jesus -
it is real easy to miss the point of Jesus as teacher – always calling us to learn -
and to live in this world with honor to ourselves and to others.

This may be little more than you bargained for this morning.

But that is where the Gospel of John takes me.
It is like a stage and a curtain.
You open the curtain – and it opens to more curtains
to the spiritual traditions that have existed for a long – long time.
There is so much more about Jesus.
And John's gospel opens up a new curtain for us
and then the *Gospel of Thomas* opens up even more.



What is it – to be faithful followers of Jesus today?
Surely it is to learn all we can – and to commit our lives to learning -
to commit our lives to the kind of living that he calls us to.
Jesus was trying to help his followers re-imagine the world.
Surely that is what it takes today.

ⁱ References: Rex Hunt in his liturgical resources, *The Gospel According to Thomas*, and Karen Armstrong's *The Bible*