

December 25, 2005
Matthew 1:18-25
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“The Bread of Life”

(In southern France, there are nativity scenes that include, in addition to the traditional characters of Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the shepherds, the wisemen, the angels and animals, all of the characters of a typical French town who come to see the Christ Child. These characters represent the activities and occupations of the human community such as the egg lady, the sausage man, the flower lady, the baker, the drummer, the lady with firewood and even the village priest. These characters are called "les santons," or the little saints. This story is based on the figure of the baker who rises early to bake bread for the whole village.)

Somewhere, off the beaten path, there was a small village beside a wide stream and nestled between two hills. In the village, there was a young boy named Jean Pierre, whose mother and father were the town bakers. The whole family was involved in making bread, cookies and pastries for the village. The family had been the village bakers for many generations.

Now, there are some jobs that are hard because they take a lot of time; some that are hard because you have to do heavy labor; some that are difficult because you have to travel long distances or study very hard. There are some jobs that are hard because they have to be done at odd hours when everybody else is asleep. Baking bread is one of those jobs. Each day, Jean Pierre's whole family had to wake up long before the sun rose to make the bread for the village. In their village, bread was made fresh each day. People would come in every morning to buy fresh bread for their breakfast of hot milk and coffee - which people drank out of large round bowls - and fresh bread spread with butter and homemade jam. If his family did not get up early enough to stoke the large brick ovens, mix the flour, water and yeast, allow time for the bread to rise, then the whole town would be disappointed and hungry. So, before Jean Pierre could go to school, he had to work many hours with his family in the bakery.

Even though it was a hard job that had to be done every day, Jean Pierre still loved the smell of fresh golden brown bread when his mother took it from the oven. Nothing could compare with eating a piece of that warm bread, crusty on the outside and soft on the inside. Sometimes, late in the afternoon, when he was still at school, he would daydream about that bread and rush home for a simple dinner of soup and bread.

Baking bread was a business. Over the years, his parents had carefully calculated how much bread to bake each day. It was important not to run out, so that the people of the town would think well of their business and depend upon the little bakery for their bread. It was important not to bake too much or they would lose money and go out of business. On the days when his family had baked too much bread, at the end of the day, when the shop was about to close, they would share their bread with the poorer families in the town -

Madame Robert, whose husband had been killed in a farming accident, was left to raise three children on what little money sewing and cleaning produced and what little produce that came out of her small garden. There was Monsieur Bodin who had lost a leg in the war; and Monsieur Couderc who had an odd way of speaking and funny smell.

Recently, there was almost never any extra bread! The whole town was full of strangers. The government had declared that everybody had to return to their hometown to be counted in a census. He heard his parents complaining about it at night. They thought it was some new scheme the government had cooked up to increase taxes or find out who the young men were so they could force them to serve in the Emperor's army. People were sleeping all over the town. All these travelers who had cousins in town were staying with them. The inns were full. Why, he had even heard of people sleeping in barns and stables. For the last few nights, his family had been getting up earlier and earlier to bake enough bread to feed all these people. No matter how much bread they baked, there never seemed to be enough. Every day at school, Jean Pierre was tired and almost fell asleep.

It was when this huge crowd of travelers was in town that the strangest thing happened. As his family was waking up at midnight to begin the morning chores in the bakery, they heard a strange sound they had never heard before - at least not at that hour of the night. A rooster crowed. Or, should I say, a rooster crowed and crowed and crowed and crowed. Jean Pierre thought it never would stop crowing. It was loud enough to wake the whole town. Crazy rooster, he must have thought it was dawn. When Jean Pierre looked out of the bakery window, he noticed that the night sky looked especially bright. Even though he was tired and sleepy, there was a kind of eerie peace that fell over him as he stoked the fire and waited for the bread to rise.

That morning, when the crowds of people began to pour into the bakery, they were all talking about the baby that had been born to two travelers who staying in the stable behind the old inn on the edge of town. It was a rooster that hopped up on top of the stable that seemed to announce the baby's birth to the whole world. Then, shepherds came into town saying they had seen a vision of angels telling them of a special child's birth. The angels said that this child would be our savior, the messiah born to the family of King David. Everyone who came into the bakery that day seemed to agree that this poor family didn't look like any royalty they had ever seen. Why, the baby didn't even have a decent sleeper to wear. They had wrapped him in rags and placed him in an animal feeding trough. The people said that you couldn't believe the word of shepherds. They are a wild, uncivilized bunch, hanging out in the fields, telling tall tales and crude jokes. The townsfolk saw that this family didn't have two francs to rub together. How were they going to keep body and soul together so that this mother could nurse that baby boy? The best thing that could happen, most people thought, was for this family to leave town as quickly as possible and return to their home. With all this talk about angels, royal families and the Messiah, they had better be careful that they don't attract the notice of King Herod and bring his wrath down upon everyone.

Jean Pierre heard all of this conversation as he sold the bread they had baked that day. He didn't quite know what to make of these things; but he was a curious boy and wanted to see this baby and his family for himself. That morning in the bakery, there seemed to be an

extra large number of folks buying bread. Before long, all the bread was sold. There wasn't any bread left for his own family's breakfast...except for the one loaf he had hidden away for the baby's family. He knew they must be hungry. He saved a loaf for them. When all the bread was sold and the bakery tidied up for the day, he slipped out with the bread under his cloak and, on his way to school, went to see the manger baby.

When he arrived at the stable, it was quiet. All the curiosity-seekers had come and gone. The only ones there were Joseph, Mary and the baby asleep in the manger. When Joseph saw Jean Pierre, he invited him to come forward. In the dim light, Jean Pierre asked Monsieur Joseph what they were planning to name the baby. Joseph replied, "Jesus... the angel said to call him Jesus. It means God saves." Jean Pierre pulled the loaf of bread out from under his cloak and gave it to Joseph. How good the simple bread tasted to Mary and Joseph. It was the first food they had to eat since the baby was born.

Years later, Jean Pierre took over responsibility for the bakery from his parents, who were now very old. Jean Pierre had a family of his own. He has a good life, but there were times when he wondered if this is all there is: waking up before dawn, stoking the fire in the oven, mixing the bread, kneading the bread, waiting for it to rise, baking the bread, selling the bread and the next day starting all over again. A daily ritual. An endless routine. One day, he and his wife would be too old to bake the bread. He hoped that one of his children who worked beside him would take over the bakery. Then what? He never thought much about death. He always figured there was nothing he could do about it so why bother to think about it. Yet, as he looked at his gnarled hands, nursed his aching back and felt his own energy decline, he did wonder at times, what, if anything, came next. In such moments, he realized that he was afraid. He thought about his life. He tried to be fair, honest and kind, but sometimes his temper got the best of him. He didn't know why he did it, but sometimes he said and did things that were mean and hurtful to his wife, children and even some of the folks that got on his nerves. There were things he knew he should do, like forgiving Monsieur Brest. One time Monsieur Brest had sold him bad flour that was full of worms. Jean Pierre just couldn't bring himself to do it. Just thinking about the way he was cheated made him snap at his youngest child, who happened, at that moment, to spill some flour.

Jean Pierre had heard many folks talk about a teacher named Jesus. He wondered if it could possibly be the same Jesus he had seen as a baby. He was teaching on a hillside not too far away and Jean Pierre went to hear him. When he arrived, he was astonished by the vast crowd that had gathered before him. Jean Pierre heard Jesus speak about the God who created the world and loves the world and everything and everyone in it. Jesus said that God was greater than anything we could imagine or envision; yet, God was also closer to us than our own thoughts, feelings or breath. God was beyond all things; yet, even the simplest things like water, bread, wine, flowers and birds speak to us of God. The most ordinary experiences - such as finding a lost sheep, building a barn, feeding a hungry stranger and even baking bread - could help us know God's presence. God is here to forgive us, teach us, satisfy our hunger and thirst and fill us with God's Spirit. Jesus spoke about how much this God loves us and how this God wants us to love our neighbors in the same way that God loves us. We can trust this God to take care of us in life and in death. No matter what happens to us, we will always be with God, for God has prepared a place for us in heaven.

Some who had come to hear Jesus had traveled a long way. Many had not brought anything to eat with them, not so much as a loaf of bread. Jean Pierre himself was hungry. He, too, had nothing to eat. He had never known such hunger. It was hunger for bread, yes, but something more than bread. He longed to believe the words that Jesus spoke, words that could satisfy the restlessness in his soul and the troubled spirit that sometimes plagued him. He watched as Jesus took five small loaves of bread and a few fish, blessed them, broke them into pieces and gave them to the hungry crowd. The bread tasted just like the bread he remembered making all of his life, the bread he had first tasted fresh from the oven as a hungry child. Except this bread was different. Then, he heard Jesus say, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." As Jean Pierre ate the bread, he knew in his heart that everything Jesus said was true. He ate the bread and he was satisfied.