My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

A loaf of Bread has been called many things through the years, hasn’t it? It’s the stuff of poetry. Only two things do people desire, said the Roman poet Juvenal. What are those (bread and circuses). Tweedledee and Tweedledum, talking to a very confused Alice in Through the Looking Glass, are oft quoted from their poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter”. ‘A loaf of bread,’ the Walrus said, ‘is what we chiefly need’. The great Pablo Neruda wrote, “Peace goes into the making of a poem as flour goes into the making of bread”. The equivalency is that bread is necessary for life.

It’s been philosophized to try and give it meaning. “Give me yesterday’s Bread, this Day’s Flesh, and last Year’s Cyder”, said Benjamin Franklin. “The sky is the daily bread of the eyes,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. Or how about Julia Child, who famously spoofed the supermarket breads of the 1960s saying, “How can a nation be great if its bread tastes like Kleenex?”

But it’s necessity goes deeper than the body or the image. Omar Khayyam, a great Persian poet, wrote of his needs around the time of the first crusade: “A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.” And Mahatma Ghandi wrote, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread”.

So when Jesus says to his disciples, “I am the bread of life”, he does so with all of the urgency, poetry, imagery, and deep yearning that each of us holds in our souls for what bread should be. It’s reminiscent of the ‘bread that comes down from heaven’ in last week’s scriptures. Manna. The miraculous bread that appears each day to sustain the Israelites in the desert. And yet, Jesus gently re-writes the meaning of “bread of heaven” just as he re-writes the vine and the branches. Whenever Jesus talks about himself, he talks of himself in terms of truth. The True Vine. The True Bread. The Truth.

But it’s hard for us to imagine manna, isn’t it? What must it have looked like? What did it taste like? And how much did we need to sate ourselves? What exactly are we talking about when we think of bread that is so good, and so filling, that we will be satisfied?

Well, I’ve made a fair amount of bread in my day, and I can tell share a few insights I’ve learned along the way, and maybe this will help us. First off, the bread I’ve made is NOT unleavened bread. Its key ingredient is yeast, and I use the instant kind that comes in little packets. Carbon dioxide is responsible for all the bubbles that make holes in bread, making it lighter and fluffier. Because gas is created as a result of yeast growth, the more the yeast grows, the more gas in the dough and the more light and airy your bread loaf will be. So our bread is full of holes because of carbon dioxide. In terms of the bread of heaven, is that a good or bad thing? I can tell you this much, too much talking generates a ton of carbon dioxide, takes up sometimes all the oxygen in the room. So I think talkin’ to a point about the bread of heaven is good, but too much might just make us all faint from not bein’ able to BREATHE even as we’re lookin’ to bake the bread.

Another thing about bread is that if we’re not careful, we’ll end up with little bitty bricks and not really what we wanted or anticipated. Dense or heavy bread can be the result of not kneading the dough long enough. Mixing the salt and yeast together or losing patience in the middle of molding your bread and there is not enough tension in your finished loaf before baking. Have we ever done that? As we’re lookin’ to get the best bread of heaven we can imagine, have we ever just tried to shortcut our way to faith, promising God anything in the world if only we could get outta whatever we got ourselves into? We do that a lot. Help me God, just this once, and I promise I’ll pray more, go to church more, be a better….hmm. We haven’t kneaded the bread long enough, we lose patience, and want a quick answer. Too much salt and what happens? It’ll kill the yeast, just like too much sugar. Patience, friends, is key here. Just work the dough, day to day, and wait for it.

Another thing about bread dough is it needs to be at the right temperature. And each recipe is different. Some breads come in from a HOT oven and are crusty outside but nice inside. Others are good all the way through. One thing for sure: For bread to bake at all, there has to be a hot oven; preheat it for at least 15 minutes. For bread, it's important the oven to be at the right temperature so the yeast can make the loaf rise enough before the flour set. Placing the dough into a cold oven and it just will not rise, will it? No sir.

And I think most of us know in order to get the best texture and flavor, dough should not only be allowed to rise, but also be given a second rise before baking. Oh, no. Wait a minute. I want my bread NOW. Turn the oven up, I waited long enough; hold on here. But a second rise allows yeast more time to work, which changes the actual fibers within the dough. If we only do a single rise, it will keep yeast from dying during the extra development and it causes the flavor to be off. We have to sometimes let things settle first and then re-work them, don’t we?

But we don't want the dough just to sit around in its same basic arrangement for the second go around. If we’re going to re-work the dough of our lives, then we have to look at it from a new point of view. And sometimes that means letting things take their course to where they might just appear to have doubled in size. But we know that when stuff gets too big, sometimes we can just press it down, or turn it over and out to prevent it from overproofing.

Here’s where we have to be careful. Because if bread is allowed to rise to more than double its size, the gluten will stretch to the point of collapse and will no longer be able to hold the gas bubbles that provide necessary structure for the loaf. So we can’t be careless and let things get too out of control.

Now here’s a little something not many folks know. C’mon in here. Listen up. Dough can rise 3 times or more providing that the yeast still has plenty of sugars and starches to feed on after the first two rises. So if you're ever stuck for time and can't bake your bread right away, you should have no problem allowing it to rise once more, assuming that you haven't used too much yeast of course. Back to that too much Carbon Dioxide thing. Too much talkin’, not enough waitin’ and prayin’. Bread and Jesus have a lot in common, huh?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

John’s Gospel has been associating Jesus with God’s word, because from the first verses this Gospel says, “And the Word was made flesh”. Both our bread-of-life Jesus and Manna are life-giving but they differ in one important way. The death of Moses and the ancestors in the wilderness was a result of their not totally trusting God; that generation that left Egypt would not live to see the promised land, and Jews of Jesus time would have known this in their bones as scripture.

But Jesus as the bread of life overcomes this hurdle. Those who come to Jesus have learned from God, and as followers of God’s word, are promised the life-giving relationship that endures; they will not die as when the body gives way to decay. Life sustains for those who are patient in their faith, allow their lives and circumstances patience, don’t speak too much and act when needed, not too soon or go in too hot. That’s the best bread of all. Thanks be to God, Amen.