

**Proper 13B August 5, 2018**

**Zombies**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

At the turn of the last century, an old monster became quite popular in modern culture. Whether it was in music, literature, comics, anime, art, movies, or television shows, all of these forms of cultural engagement saw an increase in the presence of zombies. A quick glance of recent movies, TV shows, books, comics, and such show that the zombie trend is not quite over, though their popularity might be waning.

Folklore tells us zombies most likely originated in Haiti in the mid to late 1800's and have been connected to voodoo lore. Anthropologists tell us the idea of zombies may have come from a way of enslaving people by the use of drugs that caused people to lose the ability to think for themselves. This practice was secretive, making it difficult to prove, but stories unearthed by researchers and writers like Zora Neale Hurston have helped introduce us to the concept of a vital, individual human being who has lost its capacity to engage in life. Over time, this chilling idea evolved into a monster that has the power to illuminate the sinful side of crowd mentality, consumerism, and shows the dehumanization greed, racism, sexism, ageism and other "isms" cause. Many zombie movies and stories are warnings against self-indulgence; how consuming without thought or reflection can lead to becoming someone or something who might believe they are participating in society, but instead of being part of a community are really only a "cultural dupe" that just goes around consuming, creating a fear of not enough. Even though they might look like people who are alive, because zombies produce nothing, contribute nothing, accomplish nothing, are corrupt and destructive, zombies are really dead and haven't figured that out yet.

Modern stories about zombies also warn that zombies are incredibly difficult to defeat, because they are dead. Which means they have no value for life, and they feel nothing. Zombies do not listen to reason. Zombies do not care about you or anyone else. Zombies do not even care about themselves. That is what makes them formidable enemies. Despite this challenge, many stories do show ways the living can defeat zombies, if they can resist the temptation of buying into the mentality that created the crowd of zombies, which is the real danger. Defeating zombies usually involves somehow being courageous enough to believe life is more than consuming or acquiring, life is not about blindly following the crowd. Life is about caring more about others, or the whole of creation, more than self. For those of us who follow Jesus, life is also about our connection to the author of life, God, and how we participate in the life God has so generously given to us.

While there were no zombies in today's Gospel, the message about what it means to live seems to be what Jesus was trying to convey to the crowd of people who chased after Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. Today we are back in John's Gospel, where the crowd could be considered a character all its own. I know the translation we just heard said "people" to describe the group of 5000 plus who had feasted on a miracle of loaves and fishes last week, but the Greek word could also very easily be translated as crowd. It's a huge number of people that in John's Gospel seem to be functioning as a unit. Notice there is only one voice for all those people. Which makes me wonder if there is one spokesperson for the 5000 plus, or if there are 5000 voices speaking in eerie-sounding unison, like a crowd in a horror movie. You can imagine what you will, but this crowd sounds a little zombie-ish to me.

Especially because they had just experienced a miracle; they had just eaten food that shouldn't have been enough, they had tasted for themselves in their own mouths the abundance of God, who is generosity. Yet apparently, the crowd missed something. Perhaps they were too busy stuffing their empty bellies to notice the flavor of what they ate or were too busy getting as much as they could to appreciate what was happening, what they were a part of. Maybe they were so busy consuming that it made them dead not only to what was happening, it made them unable to recognize who they were with.

So when they woke up the day after being in the midst of God's abundance, they went looking for Jesus, and Jesus seemed to have a problem with their choice of action because he accused them of wanting more to eat. More to consume. Another easy meal. Notice the crowd did not openly deny his accusation. Instead they engaged in a back and forth conversation that is typical in John's Gospel where Jesus and his conversation partner, in this case it is the crowd, seem to be talking on two different levels and Jesus tries to get them to come up to his level. Maybe the miraculous feeding wasn't really about putting food into mouths, even though it is easy to get distracted and see it that way. Maybe Jesus hoped the crowd would recognize something else.

The issue they seem to be discussing is life, and what is required for life. The word that the author of John uses to represent this concept is bread. In Jesus' day, bread was considered required daily nourishment. For those of us who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least in the first world, bread has pretty much lost this meaning. We tend to look at bread as suspiciously full of whatever is going to cause us to gain weight, so many of us cut it out of our diets. Others among us cannot tolerate gluten, so the word bread has other connotations, mostly worry over whether it can be eaten without making someone sick. It's pretty easy to get distracted and start talking about bread, the yeasty wheat-y stuff dieticians now warn us about. But to do so is

to fall into the same consumer mentality the crowd did in today's Gospel and miss the point. The crowd couldn't seem to get beyond the type of bread, the kind Jesus gave out and the kind Moses pointed out to the Israelites when they were hungry in the wilderness. These breads will only make consumers hungry again, and while they may have been a necessary component for keeping up one's strength in living day to day, that bread is not what Jesus was talking about when he mentioned food that does not perish, and he called himself the Bread of Life. But because the crowd couldn't seem to get beyond the consumer mentality, they could not recognize what Jesus was talking about.

And as I said before, it's not an easy transition to make; to shift focus from bread to life. When we can, though, when we can start with life instead of fretting about what kind of bread Jesus is talking about and worrying whether or not everyone can eat the bread without getting sick or gaining weight. When we can see Jesus is talking about himself as the stuff of life that will sustain us through all the daily routines, unexpected changes, uncomfortable transitions, tragedies, losses, celebrations, new opportunities, travel delays, disappointments, delights, gifts, challenges, and all the other elements of living a full and meaningful life, then we can move from consuming to living, from being part of the crowd, to being with Jesus and seeing Christ present here and now: in the sacraments like Holy Communion, in worship, in the barista who serves you a cup of coffee, in the child who made you smile, in places or people who are more than just what is seen. Because life is more than getting what you can. Remember, in other places in John's Gospel Jesus said. that he came to give us abundant life. And when he said that he didn't mean unlimited bread bowls, large bank accounts, multiple car garages, or closets full of clothing. Abundant life isn't about food or things. Abundant life is about life lived in relationship with God. Abundant life is about overflowing joy. Abundant life is about facing the pain and grief of loss because loss is evidence of love; and certainly abundant life is about loving: loving God and each other. Abundant life is about peace that isn't absence of conflict, it is assurance of God's presence even in the worst situations. Abundant life is about generosity which means there is always enough – enough food, enough space, enough resources. Abundant life means delighting in the beauty around us, beauty in nature, in people, in acts of kindness, in a good story, and yes, even in a delicious meal or dessert, especially when they are prepared with love and care. Abundant life shows appreciation, considers others' needs, recognizes what God has given to us and gives back to God out of joy and desire, not obligation. Abundant life is a life that has meaning, has and gives dignity, expresses wholeness, and is free from fear, sin, oppression, and division. Not just for some people, but for all people.

This is what Jesus came to give, this is the “food that doesn’t perish” and is what Jesus means when he says he is the Bread of Life. And this is the antidote to zombies and crowd mentality and an empty existence no amount of consuming will ever fill or satisfy.

I know it is not always easy to resist crowd mentality. Many of us, including myself, feel the pressures of the crowd to do what they say and feel what they feel. I hear the message from the crowd that I should be living in a state of constant anger, that anger is the only thing that will change the world or get attention. But when I test this temptation by looking to Jesus and his abundant life, I don’t see anger, although Jesus had moments where he was angry, anger was not a hallmark of his ministry. Instead, I see something much, much harder to live by: belief in God and in Jesus Christ who through Jesus’ resurrection has already defeated the powers of sin and evil, even if the crowd doesn’t believe it.

Maybe that is why Jesus called belief work in today’s Gospel, because belief isn’t just a feeling, it is something we practice. It is both a gift from God and a gift we give to God. It is both what we say and how we live. And by live I don’t mean what we consume, even a dead zombie can consume, I mean how we engage with the tremendous gift God has given us and how we give back to God: how we do or do not forgive, how we listen to God as well as to others, how we resist being part of the crowd to stand out as followers of Jesus, how we attend worship services not to critique the music but to praise God with a community, and thank God, how we pray by dwelling with God, bless others by sharing our faith and unselfishly serving and giving, how we open up our lives and our parish to the community around us, whether its opening the chapel or opening up Nehls hall to the public through our coffee shop ministry, how we rest and receive the gift of God’s grace, restoration, and renewal.

These practices are more than just the 7 word life-challenge our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry has given us: Learn, Turn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest, they are how we practice what we believe, as individuals, and as a parish, a community of people who are following Jesus, opening up our hearts, our lives, and our building to people hoping others will find the unperishable stuff of life that is Jesus. This is our work of belief to do and delight in together; and it is work I am so happy and excited to be doing with you.