Each spring, I look forward to going on the computer and looking up the website of the Decorah Eagle project. For each of the past five years, viewers have been able to follow a live webcast of an eagles's nest 80 feet high in a cottonwood tree in Decorah, Iowa.

The nest is massive, about six feet across. It takes the mother and father eagles weeks to gather sticks and grasses to get the nest ready for each spring's eggs. Once the camera is activated, you can tune in at any time, 24 hours a day, to see what's happening in the nest. The first few weeks are kind of boring since the parents are sitting on the eggs pretty much all of the time, but once the eggs start to crack open, things get interesting. This year, there were three eggs that produced three small, fuzzy little eaglets. These babies flop around in the nest for weeks, unable to stand up or move around. Mom or Dad is usually right there, covering them up, keeping them warm and safe most of the time while the other parent is out looking for food. As soon as the parent arrives with a fish or a rabbit or a snake, the eaglets stretch out their weak little necks and raise their heads to the sky, beaks open and searching for something to fill them. Mom or Dad patiently tears off small pieces of meat and feeds each of its children until the food is gone and the eaglets settle in for a nap until the next feeding time rolls around. Each year, I am amazed at how these vulnerable little babies, which will grow up to be among the most majestic creatures of the sky, are totally dependent on their parents for every morsel of food that goes into their mouths. Not once have I seen one of those adult eagles let their children down.

Today's lessons give us memorable stories of a parent taking exquisite care of his children. The prophet Elijah was on the run. He had just carried out the killing of 450 prophets of the pagan god, Baal, and Queen Jezebel, who worshipped Baal herself, was outraged. She ordered soldiers to hunt Elijah down and kill him. Elijah was able to get ahead of the soldiers; he fled to the wilderness where the soldiers did not find him. Elijah was so tired and hungry and scared, he asked God to let him die there. But God had plans for Elijah, so he sent an angel to provide Elijah with bread and water. A couple of meals like that were enough to strengthen Elijah so that he could journey 40 days and nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. God provided for Elijah when Elijah was weak and hungry and without any way to feed himself. Like a weak, floppy eaglet, Elijah was totally dependent on God for food and shelter, for without God providing for him, he surely would have perished.

Jesus had fed a crowd of thousands with two fish and five loaves of bread. He tried to get away from them for a time of rest but the crowd followed him for they were slow to let their lunch ticket out of their sight. He told the crowd, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Here was the one sent from God to take away the hunger and the thirst of the entire world, but the people who knew Jesus and where he came from weren't buying it. They knew Mary and Joseph, Jesus' parents, who were unassuming, hard-working people. Who was this son of theirs, claiming to have come down from heaven? Jesus came from Nazareth, not heaven. Where had he gotten the high-falutin' idea he was somehow connected to God and not the earthly parents who had raised him? Jesus didn't budge. He made another audacious claim: Everyone who has heard and learns from God comes to Jesus and whoever believes in him has eternal life. “That bread and fish I fed you a couple of days ago?” Jesus said to them. “That was just part of God's plan. Through me, you not only get your physical hunger taken care of, but your spiritual hunger as well.” Jesus reminded those who doubted him that God had provided manna for their ancestors when they were hungry in the wilderness. The food fueled them for their long journey, but eventually, those people died, as all who live in this world will do one day. Manna was earthly food, Jesus told the people, precious because it got the people of Israel from Egypt into the promised land, but that food didn't last. Jesus came to provide and to be the food that would carry God's people into eternity. But the people weren't buying it, any more than they believed that the man in front of them was anyone but the carpenter's son.

“Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Imagine how hard it was for the first hearers of those words to believe them. There they were, beaks in the air, screeching more of the food Jesus had given them to eat, not knowing that he also was the food that didn't spoil in a day or two but would feed them for all time.

Like Elijah and the crowd on the mountain, you and I are totally dependent on God for the very basic needs of human life. Without what comes out of the ground or walks on it, we could not survive. God has provided, through the wisdom of creation, for our needs for food and shelter. But God doesn't stop there, for God wasn't a much fuller relationship with us, one that engages our minds, our hearts and our spirits. So God sends us Jesus: brother, teacher, friend. God doesn't send Jesus as God might an angel, to make periodic trips to catch up with us, then return to heaven. God sends Jesus as a real human being, to walk this earth, to learn what it means to have friends to trust and enemies to fear, to stand up for us to the very end of the road and his life on this earth.

When Jesus gives his body for the sake of the world, it is not some kind of symbolic gesture, but the very real sacrifice of one who died on a cruel instrument of death. When Jesus says, “The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh,” he's speaking of his body and blood, given and shed for you and me and all who walk this earth, given and shed for each one of us every time we come to his holy table.

Elijah, the large crowd Jesus fed, you and me and all who desire what Jesus has to give – we all huddle together as weak as newborn eaglets, our floppy necks straining to raise our mouths to the sky, dependent on Jesus to bring us what we need to live. Sometimes the nest seems cramped and smelly and we fear other voices will drown out our own. Sometimes we push and shove so we can get what we need before those around us. Jesus speaks to us plainly and clearly so we can understand, “Take and eat. Take and drink. There is enough of me to go around. Take some of what I have given you and share with the other birds in the nest. Look and you will see some who need help raising their heads or believing that what I give is for them, too. Don't worry. There is enough of me for today and there will be enough tomorrow. Eternal life starts today. Go ahead, believe what I tell you and act as if it is true.”

I don't know about you, but in the deepest, darkest parts of the night, when I raise my weak little neck and cry to God for help, it calms me to know I am not the only bird in the nest, that I huddle with others who cry along with me, some even louder and more urgently. It fuels me faith to know that all our cries will be answered by the one God has sent to be our all-caring mother and father. This is the one who has carefully prepared a nest for us here and in a more permanent place, the one who hears our cries and answers them, the one who feeds us every day with exactly what we need.

Amen.

*Pentecost 11B*

*August 9, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 6:35, 41-51*