

John 6:24-35

I've mentioned before a podcast I like a lot, "Straight White American Jesus."ⁱ Last week they aired an interview with Susannah Crockford, an anthropologist specializing in religion, ecology, and political economy. She's just published a monograph on spirituality in Sedona, Arizona, and she talked about how the kind of spirituality that characterizes many seekers who settle in Sedona is also receptive to conspiracy thinking and, in fact, conducive to the development of people like the "Q-Anon shaman" who was one of the more colorful insurrectionists on January 6.

This spirituality is internally diverse, of course, but Crockford's thumbnail description of it goes like this:

the central operative concept is that of energy. . . and energy vibration and it has frequencies. So all energy vibrates at certain [00:12:00] frequencies and energy is what composes the universe. The universe is a sense of divinity. . . . And the universe kind of emanates out in waves of energy.

. . . The rippling of the energy out from the universe, which is also sometimes called source or spirit or sometimes God. And as these kind of ripples of energy, kind of emanate out from the source, the more distant you get from the source, the more separate you become from it.

the higher up you are [sent] through the dimensional levels towards source, the less you get matter, the more things have less form, the more kind of spiritual they become, but also the more formless they become.

. . . the whole way that you raise your vibration to unify with the universe is by being very positive, right? You got to keep your vibes high. But it's quite clear that for much of the world, the vibes are not high. [00:20:00]. . . So there's to be an explanation for this. Like it's a form of theodicy on one level, like the explanation for why evil exists in the universe. What's keeping them down. . . . There's a real customer logical principle behind it, which is that we're in the third dimension.

And the third dimension is riddled, as I said, [that] like suffering war, but also with these kind of malevolent forces like reptilians, which is an idea from conspiracy theorist, David Icke, who's incredibly popular in this. Reptilians are like the bad aliens. And there's a

wall between the bad aliens and the good A's and the good aliens is like the grays and the Zetas and the Nordics. . . . the reptilians are in cahoots with the new world order.

Susannah Crockford points out that these practitioners are not entirely wrong—our water *is* being poisoned, and banks *don't* necessarily serve the public, and so forth—but that their attribution is inaccurate. Our problems have to do with political choices by human beings in the context of ideologies and institutions; they are not the consequences of evil alien agents who are essentially “other” from us. I really recommend the whole interview, because I’ve barely scratched the surface here.

But it caught my attention because the Gospel of John is engaged in a polemic against some who have beliefs that are strikingly similar to those that Crockford describes. We call them “gnostics” now, though that category is also a little more convenient than it is accurate. But the idea among gnostics, for instance the author of the Gospel of Thomas, was that we are spiritual beings imprisoned in corrupt material bodies. Due to a catastrophe at the beginning of time, we were separated from our good creator and put on this very flawed material planet by the evil god of the Hebrew Bible. The higher, transcendent God is known only to Jesus and the Gnostic elect, who have a spark of the divine within them. Jesus offers salvation, not by sacrificing for our sins or bringing us to repentance, but by bringing *knowledge* that provides liberation to souls trapped in this material world by human bodies. We escape our entrapment by learning who we really are and how we can return to God.

I yield to no one in my appreciation for the Gospel of Thomas. But John feels like this wing of the Jesus party has gone overboard, and I kind of see his point too. John tells the story of Doubting Thomas who put his finger into Jesus’ wounds and *then* exclaimed “My Lord and

my God!” which is a way of locating the Way to God *with Jesus* rather than entirely within ourselves. In other words, John is saying to the gnostics, you can’t be special all by yourself; you have to be embedded in a community whose identity is grounded in the divine light of Jesus. Jesus is the focus, and so we form communities around Jesus in order to travel the Way. [We understand that this is not a text relevant to interreligious dialogue.] All the “I Am” sayings in John point to Jesus as the source that is outside ourselves, the source that provides living water or bread that lasts or the vine that connects us. It’s not *just* within each of us; it’s embodied in Jesus and to get what we need, we have to go through him.

So fine; we are crystal-clear that John wants us to look outside ourselves to Jesus for the connection to the divine that we seek. But how does that look? And here we finally come to today’s reading, which everybody’s been wondering why we read it if we’re not going to talk about it. Jesus has just miraculously fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes and thriftily gathered up the leftovers, which fill 12 baskets. People are pretty excited about that, and they track him down the next day. Jesus tells them that he knows they’re motivated by their desire for bread (and who can blame them), but that they should really work for the food that endures for eternal life, which he can also give them. “What must we do, exactly?” they ask, and he tells them that the work of God is “to believe in him whom God has sent,” e.g., Jesus. The conversation continues with him setting up a parallel between himself and Moses—but the manna in the wilderness lasted only a day while the “true bread from heaven” is Jesus himself, and those who believe in him will never hunger or thirst. This whole story can feel like a bait and switch—we came for bread, which is self-evidently necessary and useful. You want us to “believe” something abstract, and then spiritually we’ll never hunger or thirst, also

abstract. How about we go back to the real loaves and fishes because that was actually helpful.

The trick word here is “believe.” “The work of God is to believe.” I am told that John never uses the noun for faith (“faith is a thing”) but always its verbal form, “believe,” “come to faith,” etc. John sees faith as having an active commitment, in this case to Jesus. And who is Jesus? In John he’s always doing “signs” to tell us who he is: he heals, he feeds people, he teaches and includes people. Those are representations of God—not an idea but actions. God heals the wounded, God feeds the hungry, God embraces us and brings us to fuller life. Believing in Jesus as a representation of God means doing the things that Jesus does to represent God.

“We can believe in justice as a thing,” says artist and theologian, Elizabeth Gray King. “We can believe in love and care and kindness and humility. But until we start living and acting as love, living out that care, graciously spilling over with kindness and working with others in humility as compared to power, a belief is just a belief, almost an object to be admired ... Believing in resurrection is ok. Living resurrection is quite another thing.”ⁱⁱ

“Belief” in Jesus, as John has it, is the kind of reflective action that Terri talked about last week. Go out into the world with an awareness that God is present. When presented with employees who were harassed for their green cards, recognize that today belief means enacting truth, justice, and compassion in their lives. Bread that does not perish. Do your best; later, reflect on it and in what ways you were able to enact the kingdom and how you sensed the presence of God in so doing. Share, testify, listen, repeat. You may feel that you are operating alone sometimes, but (as Terri said) you know that you are not. You are connected to us and to Jesus and to God; God is channeling grace and courage and compassion through

you.

The “bread” that God gives us when we do the work of belief is not a reward for doing it. It is *in* the doing it. It is not just in the actions, like defending your employees or caring for an invalid, but in the whole process of acting, reflecting, testifying to it with others, hearing others’ reflections and testimonies, and over time opening the apertures that receive grace, God’s shalom, the fullness of the kingdom.

ⁱ <https://straightwhiteamericanjesus.com/>

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Gray King, “[Sermon](#)” (Didsbury: Didsbury United Reformed Church, 11 April 2021) quoted here: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-2/commentary-on-john-624-35-5>