Being a Christian can sometimes be a bit embarrassing. At times it can feel like my un-churched friends look at me like they suspect I might also think the Easter Bunny is real or Santa Claus manages to stuff his oversized body down the chimney of each home on Christmas Eve. When you really think about it, this information about Jesus and the miracles or signs we have been reading about in John do stretch our human minds past the point of what we might deem practical.

My friends who aren’t Christian know that the laws of Newtonian physics aren’t suddenly flexible if you just have enough faith. Atoms and molecules don’t change shape. So where does that leave us as Christians when we read about the feeding of the 5,000, or fathom how he walks on water. Oh, and let’s not forget how Jesus healed people as they touched the hem of his clothes or Jesus telling a man to pick up his mat and walk in John 5.

I point to these signs beginning in John 5 and ending in chapter 6, because this is the only way to make sense of our Gospel lesson today. Today we come to an end of what the author of John meant when he said, “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Richard Rohr uses the poet Rainer Maria Rilke [1875–1926] to help us understand what eternal life might mean to us. Rilke says, “no forcing [and no] holding back.” What does that mean? Rohr’s summary of Rilke’s words are this, “[1] When we are receptive we let go of our agendas and expectations. We allow ourselves to see beneath preconceived ideas. Rather than going after what we want in life, or “forcing our way through life,” we cultivate a contentment with what actually is. Instead of “holding back” and merely observing life or falling asleep to it, we stay awake and alert, participating fully in its messiness and we keep our eyes open for the holy presence in its midst. It is in moments of keeping our eyes open for holy presence that we can make sense of Jesus. And, ultimately, how we can make sense of how we respond to Jesus.

The Judeans object to the words of Jesus because they know Jewish history; these guys are the insiders, the ones who know the history backwards and forwards. They think they know how God does things and how things should be done. And if history wasn’t enough to discount the words of Jesus, then where Jesus was raised is proof enough. They mutter, “Claiming to have come down from heaven? We know his folks. We know he came from Nazareth, not from heaven.” The Judeans also know their scripture. They have no problem pointing out to Jesus, “The bread of heaven was the manna fed to our ancestors back in the time of Moses.” “The Lord God said, “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods.” They know it all. They just don’t know Jesus.

Because to know Jesus requires people to be surprised by the unordinary; to know Jesus is to break through our preconceived ideas of Godly presence, and let go of age-old expectations. We hide our lack of trust in God by saying, “But, we’ve always done it this way.”

We read in the Old Testament stories how God provides bread for the Israelites when they escape from slavery into freedom. The history of the Israelites demonstrates how ‘they kept track of God’s provision in their lives, even though they grumbled, complained, and wished for their old lives back. If you re-read parts of Exodus and Deuteronomy you find a people who struggle knowing or trusting God, but their needs are still met, in spite of their ability to believe God was with them. Yet, it is through their efforts of looking for a God to be with them that their trust grew. The many feasts still found in the Jewish calendar point to a God who is with us. Jesus is doing the same thing in our Gospel lesson today, but instead of being seen by the Judeans as being sent by God the Father, many of them shake their heads in disbelief, and claim he is a fake.

Jesus, in our Gospel lesson today, is telling the Judeans and us that we need to be looking for signs of the holy presence of God in our lives. And as we look for God’s presence, we need to let go of our certainty that we know all about God, because we don’t. Can you be surprised by the Spirit of God, and be changed by the Spirit? The Judeans said no, they didn’t want to change or be surprised, yet, the twelve who may be a bit shaky in their new understanding of Jesus, say, “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

We have people who wrote a story about God. How God created the universe out of nothing; and now we have a man named Jesus who is pushing people to be lead by the spirit, because “it is the spirit that gives life.”

Maybe the mistake the Judeans made wasn’t only that they forgot how God works, but they lost sight of their own limitations. They defaulted to what they knew and understood rather than what they needed. The crowd of Judeans thought it was more important to point out the lies that Jesus was spewing rather than listening to why Jesus thought he might be the bread of life for them. They failed to be curious about God creating something new.

Earthquakes, pain and suffering, the Covid virus, and rumors of war are part of our lives, just as they were part of the Israelite lives, and the lives of the early Christians. The author of John says to the new followers of Jesus, “Jesus is the bread and source of life. Jesus is God.

Perhaps that is why when I read the Psalms I bump into my own need. “How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.”

The Judeans get a glimpse of who Jesus proclaims to be, and they say, no thanks; I don’t need you. We are met with the same question as the Judeans, “Are we looking for signs of God in our lives.”

The members of St. Paul’s are people who pray with their feet. We believe in helping people live better lives and safer lives. But is the Spirit of God challenging us to find God in new ways. Can we be vulnerable with our neighbors to admit that they may know more about God than I do? Jesus is proclaiming that the Spirit is the one who shapes and gives us life. May we “come to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Amen.