

- Hermann Hesse, who was big back in the '60s, when I was a student, wrote in the 1920s, "There is no reality except that which is contained within. "That is why so many people live such an unreal life. "They take the images outside of them for reality. "They never allow the real world within to assert itself." It's hard to believe that there was a time when someone actually had to argue that point. Today, for many modern people, all reality is circumscribed within the self, within our subjectivity. Now, we all believe that there is no there there except within. That is until Sunday, when we are assaulted by the intrusive words of Scripture. And every time we pick up the bible, we challenge Hesse's assumption that there is no reality except that contained within me. If we've dreamed up a God all by ourselves from within ourselves, well then how do you explain weird words of scripture such as the ones for this Sunday from the weird Gospel of John. Jesus said, "I am the living bread come down from heaven. "Whoever eats this bread will live forever. "And the bread that I will give "for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews, who disputed among themselves saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I say to you, "unless you eat the flesh of the son of man "and drink his blood, there is no life in you. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood "have eternal life, and I will raise them up "on the third day, for my flesh is true food "and my blood is true drink. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood "abide in me, and I in them. "Just as the living father sent me "and I live because of the father, "so whoever eats me will live because of me. "This is the bread that came down from heaven, "not that which your ancestors ate and they died, "but the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things when he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult. "Who can accept it?" This is the word of the Lord. (crowd murmurs) I vividly remember when a student emerged from the Easter service here, and he said to me, "You know, I now know what you Christians are up to. "We studied all about this in philosophy. "It's called projection." "Feuerbach said that we've got this desire in us "to live forever. "And therefore, we projected this infantile wish, "and we named that God." And I replied in love, "Well, that just shows how stupid you are." (crowd laughs) "If we were going to project a God, "we would not have projected this God. "We have demonstrated time and again "throughout human history that we are capable of producing "a more accessible and likable God than this one." But the boy's thinking is quite typical of the modern world. The modern view of God as mere infantile wish projection was born in March of 1907 when Sigmund Freud read a paper in Vienna called Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices. In that paper, Freud claimed, on the basis of his work with neurotic patients, that "the petty ceremonials "of religion are a sort of personality sickness. "God is only a symptom of inner insecurities. "One might venture to regard religion "as a universal obsessional neurosis." Religious people are sick. Now you know that it is of the nature of modernity to reduce complex human phenomena to something which is only something else. There is no reality in modernity outside me. Therefore, what we call God is only a projection of something within. These are the same people who say music is only a series of sound waves bouncing about. Art is only a series of scratches upon a canvas that stimulate certain neurochemical processes in the brain. Reductionism is the hallmark of the modern mind. Freud continued in his infamous *The Future of an Illusion*, 1927. There he dismisses "the fairytales of religion "as only an illusion derived from human wishes. "The effect of religious thinking "may be likened to that of a narcotic." This was what Marx had said earlier when he charged that religion was the cheap drug of poor people. Ana-Maria Rizzuto charged in a 1979 book, *The Birth of a Living*

God, that contemporary psychoanalysis never had been able to break free of Freud's reductionistic, vehemently negative account of religion. Rizzuto noted that the human being is an inherently inventive, imagining, projecting creature. Freud was right about that. In order to live in the world, we project certain images on our mental screens, images of the world that are variously accurate or inaccurate representations of the world. For instance, a toddler has a fixation with a baby blanket. Whenever that child feels insecure, it grabs the blanket and feels better. Why? Surely, that blanket is a reminder of the comforting presence of the parent. When a toddler holds the blanket, the toddler feels close to the parent. This feeling is projection, but it is not a lie. It is not a personality sickness. Rather, the child is busily projecting the comforting presence of the parent through the object of the blanket. There really is, somewhere, a parent. There really is a connection between the child's projection of the parent and the parent. The child's feeling of security when holding that trusted blanket and a parent who makes the child secure. And Rizzuto said that such projection is absolutely essential. To be human is to busily paint pictures of the world in order to live in the world. These mental pictures, though sometimes inadequate, though often limited by our imagination and our experience, are nevertheless connected to the real world. As creatures, we are desperate to place ourselves in the world, to figure out from whence we have come and where we are going. Thus, says Rizzuto, imagination, illusion, and reality are not contradictory terms. Even Freud, who took the human psyche and gave it all these great mythological names like ego, super ego, libido, was busy forming illusions which have proved quite serviceable in mapping the human psyche. Now we can argue whether or not these projections, these illusions were helpful, but why should we call them sick in the way that Freud dismissed religion? We can't be human without illusion. We live by various illusions. Some of them we call fairytales, others we call science, religion, whatever. As children, we play with toys and games. And later, we come to college and we learn to play with ideas and images and words, and all of that is our attempt to do business with the world, to find our way amid the sometimes confusing cacophony of stimuli that the world gives us. One of the reason that science works is that it has been such a successful illusion, projection. Science makes theories about what is in the world. It has ways of testing and confirming those theories. Even when its theories are not completely empirically confirmed, they are helpful, truthful ways of naming the world. And even when the theories of science are confirmed by scientific methodology, they're still images of what is. Illusions are not faults, not lies. Rather, they are projections from the richness of human experience out into our consciousness, where we organize and make sense of experience. Those who make theories about the world assemble information about the world that enable the rest of us to make sense of what's going on, to live our lives with a little less anguish and confusion. It's not a naive, sick endeavor, but rather a natural human imaginative attempt to live in the world. Maybe one reason Freud was so abusive towards religion was he realized that religion was one of his chief competitors to answer the question what's going on out there and in here. I'm saying in all of this religion is a way of thinking. Sociologist Max Weber said the first thing religion demands is sacrifice of your intellect, but he was wrong. Being religious is intellectual. Faith is not a way of killing thought. It's a way of thinking that is more creative than what the rest of the world calls thinking. Think of our tendency to project images upon the world not as arising out of our childish wishes but arising from the natural human tendency to think about what's going on. You might compare our imagination to a kind of movie screen in which images are projected upon the screen. For instance, when I tell you, "You know, this world is a rat race," that's an image. Or on some rare moment when I say, "Life is really a bowl of cherries," well, that's a projection. I'm not being crazy to engage in such projection. Rather, my projection needs to be set in the

context of experience and critique, but it ought not to be dismissed as mere craziness, as only insanity. We are individuals who live in a precarious relationship with the world. We use language and intellectual constructs that enable us to move in that world. But here's a bible question. What if the world in which we are living is not only my projection but also God's? Think about it. Christians claim that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is more than a helpful metaphor. This God is reality. This God is the source of reality. That's why we call this God by the name Creator. As we've noted, it is typical of modern humanity to think that we are the only actors, we are the only speakers, only creators of what he is. But what if the bible is right in its claim that God acts, and God speaks. What if our images of God are not merely my projections out of my own ego needs, but what if they're gifts, gifts given by a ceaselessly revealing God who has this determination to be known. I've admitted that when I'm thinking, I'm busily projecting my images upon a screen, but what if God is also projecting images on that screen? What if when I say God, I'm not just throwing my projections and my wishes out into the universe, but what if I'm also being bombarded by images that I would have in no way concocted if I had been left to myself? On Sunday, you get bombarded by these images. I am the good shepherd. I am the patient teacher. I am the crucified savior. For today, I am bread come down from heaven. I didn't come up with this stuff myself. These are images projected on us by the Christian faith. And as the disciples said with one accord after hearing Jesus teach in today's Gospel, a lot of this stuff is hard. What are we supposed to do with it? But of course, this stuff is busy doing something with us. Surely, you have sat in some classroom or maybe even at church in a sermon when from out of the blue, you have had some stunning insight, some aha experience. Now normally, as modern people, we're taught to think of such experiences are self derived. We say things like, "In that moment, I got it," or, "In that moment, it all came to me. "I figured it out." But what if in these moments, it's literally a matter that it came to me? What if on Sunday, your faith is not something summoned forth within yourself, some projection of your own yearnings, but rather, something given to you from the outside, something that gets you? In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the living bread come down from heaven." See? Come down from heaven. He comes to us. He comes outside of our consciousness from heaven. His disciples say among themselves, "This is a hard teaching. "What are we supposed to do with it?" And Jesus says, "I told you, this has come down from heaven. "Your little constricted consciousness is going to have some trouble with some of this. "It would be a reach for some of you." He is bringing something down to us that we could not have had on our own, namely the very life of God showing us a God we could have not projected on our own. He comes to us before we come to him. You know, as a pastor, I sometimes noted when people go through some religious experience, some conversion and they come to me to tell me about it, I'm conditioned to say things like, "Well, let's see. "Were you searching for something? "Were you looking for something more in your life?" And they'll say, "Well, I was looking for a date "for this weekend, but that's all." I said, "Well, perhaps there's some past experience "that helps to explain this. "Or perhaps you're dealing with some grief, "some past trauma that has occurred to you." And they said, "No, this just like happened to me. "It just like came to me." There is a living God that speaks and acts. And though we have lots of resources in the modern world for sealing out the intrusions of this God, sometimes in God's better moments, God gets to us. And it's okay to be jolted by that, to feel it's all odd and strange, to wonder, "What am I supposed to do with that? "Bread come down from heaven? "Eat my flesh and live? "What?" But don't call it crazy. Call it a gift. C.S. Lewis, like many believers, was impressed by how often the God of the bible is much larger and more interesting and more weird than anything we could have thought up on our own. Maybe he had just read today's Gospel when he thought this up. I don't know. For Lewis, he said the reality of God is often proved by

God's sheer otherness, weirdness, oddness. Lewis once wrote, "Nothing which at all times "is agreeable to us has any objective reality. "It is of the very nature of the real that it should have "sharp corners and rough edges, that it should be resistant, "that it should insist on being itself, and not you. "Dream furniture is the only kind of furniture "on which you'd never stub your toes or banged your knee." Amen.