Preaching through the long, hot summer can be wearying. It is a time when the liturgical life in many communities is often in suspended animation. Choirs are on summer break, vacation schedules are a challenge to the regular appearance of lectors, ushers, and ministers of communion, and the assembly’s number is visibly diminished. This perception of liturgical “down time” is compounded by what appears to be a long stretch of undifferentiated Sundays in Ordinary Time. Finding motivation and inspiration during these dog days of summer can be a daunting task for the homilist.

While it is not possible to forecast any break from the summer heat this August, the Lectionary does promise a textual oasis at the height of the summer slow down. This oasis is the happy consequence of the shape of Cycle B, which is centered around the Gospel of Mark. The most compact of all the Gospels, Mark is eight chapters briefer than the Gospel of Luke (Cycle C), and a full twelve chapters shorter than the Gospel of Matthew (Cycle A). Given the structure of the three-year Lectionary, Mark is simply too short to cover an entire year. Thus, it is supplemented by the Gospel of John.

The Johannine Gospel regularly appears in all three lectionary cycles during the high holidays, e.g., on Christmas, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and throughout the Easter season. Besides these yearly festival occurrences, the Fourth Gospel is also employed every three years during the Cycle B to supplement the Gospel of Mark. Previously this year we proclaimed Johannine Gospels on the Third Sunday of Advent, the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time and on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. One of the most refreshing of all occurrences of this Gospel, however, looms ahead during August.

Refreshment and oasis language is quite appropriate when considering this next Johannine incursion into Cycle B. The Johannine texts that await us are from one of the richest eucharistic chapters in the whole of the New Testament. The so-called bread of life discourse is a homilist’s delight, and should perk up even the most weary of preachers at summer’s end. The fact that John sets the entire chapter in a Passover context (6:4) is the evangelist’s own awareness of the lush teaching that awaits us.
The Gospel of John appears on the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 30) with its version of a multiplication story (6:1-15). The Johannine flow is interrupted the following Sunday with a return to the Gospel of Mark for the Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6). On the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary time (August 13), we revert back to the Fourth Gospel for the bread of life discourse (6:41-51). The following Sunday (August 20) the journey through John 6 continues, as Jesus’ discourse shifts from the “bread of life” to words about his “flesh for the life of the world” (6:51-58). Finally, on the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 27), we end this Johannine insertion as Jesus’ teaching shifts again, this time from “flesh” language to an emphasis on the “spirit that gives life” (John 6:60-69).

There is no way we can adequately explore this very rich sequence of Johannine episodes in the few paragraphs before us. Preaching on these texts requires, among other things, the use of good commentaries. The Lectionary’s selective use of the John 6 (i.e., dropping verses 16-40) demonstrates, however, that it is insufficient simply to employ a standard biblical commentary, like the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, for exegeting these texts. Such commentaries provide an expose on the whole of the text, rather than its division into segments for proclamation. That is why a liturgical preaching commentary, like Dianne Bergant’s *Preaching the New Lectionary: Year B* (Collegeville, 1999), is invaluable. While we cannot duplicate or replace Bergant, the *NJBC*, or the other exegetical resources you employ, it could be useful to provide a broader eucharistic overview which could set the context for preaching these texts.

John 6 provides a striking frame for considering the mystery of the Eucharist. His eucharistic exposé is not situated in a Last Supper context but flows from a multiplication story. Multiplication stories occur six times in the Gospels (Mark 6:34-44, Mark 8:1-10, Matt 14:31-21, Matt 15:32-39, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-15). Various Scripture scholars hold that these texts could antedate the liturgical narratives of the Last Supper. They are often approached and preached as miracle stories. While presented under the guise of a miracle, however, it is inadequate to reduce these texts to wonder narratives. This is especially true with the Johannine multiplication story which (like Mark 6:30-44) makes no suggestion that there is any acute need for food on the part of the crowd. In John, the purpose of the story is not miraculous feeding, but rather an outdoor meal in Passover as a context for a well developed teaching about Eucharist.

Thus, the gospel on the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time provides a powerful antidote against any simplistic eucharistic theology that is solely focused on the Last Supper. What Christians sometimes forget, when recalling that final meal that Jesus had with his disciples,
is that it was precisely his “last” of “many.” One scriptural wag makes the point by suggesting that, especially as depicted in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus must have weighed about three hundred pounds because he was either at a meal, going to a meal, or leaving a meal. Jesus not only “eats his way through the gospels,” but employs those many and varied meals to lead us into the multi-layered richness of Eucharist. Similarly the preacher is liberated by the Johannine text to think broadly, like the evangelist, about Eucharist. Yes, it is something we do around the table on Sunday mornings in church. Our home meals, community potlucks, prayer breakfasts and especially our feeding of the poor also have the potential for being “eucharistic.” In Eucharist we are not reenacting the Last Supper; rather, we are in touch with the whole of the reconciling and life-giving table ministry of Jesus.

The gospel for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary time brings us to the heart of John’s teaching on Eucharist. The central image is Jesus as the bread of life, that divine provision who sustains us in all we do. Yet, as John makes clear, that provision is not the basis for success, happiness or security in this world. Rather, it is clearly a nourishment for eternal life. Here Eucharist is presented not as a balm for personal ills, nor some kind of celestial pep-pill that launches us into the ministerial fray. Imbedded in the eucharistic act, and in the very bread we eat, is the clear vision of the next world as our only true home.

Yet, in one of the great paradoxes of Christian theology, this text reminds us that while not centered in this world, our commitment to be a eucharistic people must be in service of this world. This is the clear implication of that sentence which ends the gospel on the Nineteenth Sunday and begins the gospel on the Twentieth Sunday, “the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). This text, which may have been an institution narrative for the Johannine community, reveals Jesus as the one who, though not of the world, gives his life for the world (an image seen early in John 3:16). Those who follow Jesus, and feast on the life-giving bread marked with his name, are called to do the same.

On the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary time (August 27), we end this Johannine oasis with one more evocative move by the evangelist. On the previous Sunday the Fourth Gospel employed the term “flesh” (sarx) six times. This almost “cannibalistic” language could seem to support the position of those believers inclined toward a more literalistic, physical understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. In this final Johannine pericope, however, Jesus clearly teaches that it is the “spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail” (6:63). This contrast between flesh and spirit is similar to the contrast between “water” and “spirit” that the evangelist employed in Jesus’ discourse on baptism. Flesh and water are both essential for physical life, but constituent of
eternal life is the Spirit of Jesus. Flesh is only the outward sign of our existence; the essence of that existence is the Spirit.

There are, of course, many other facets of Eucharist that can be explored through the Johannine prism offered to us these Sundays. Whatever tact the preacher (in consultation with the community) takes, however, this opportunity for sustained preaching on the eucharistic mystery should not be overlooked. It is not only an opportunity for energizing late summer worship, but also for deepening the eucharistic spirituality of the Sunday assembly.

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Priestly identity can only be discerned within priestly relationship—with Christ, with the priestly people of God, with the bishop and other priests. The purpose of priestly ordination is to call forth and serve the priesthood of the whole church, the entire body. The ordained priesthood is not only a ministry for the church on behalf of Christ, but it is also a ministry done with a priestly people.

—Roger Cardinal Mahoney
“As I Have Done For You”
Pastoral Letter on Ministry