



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

The Rise of Quarantine Baking by Laura Brekke



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During the COVID-19 pandemic, so many Americans have taken up baking that there are flour shortages across the United States. Why are so many people baking bread? What needs does baking meet during this stressful time? What role does bread play in the Christian faith?

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Pandemic Baking

In recent weeks, social media has exploded with pictures and posts that are all about one thing: bread. From YouTube videos about how to create your own sourdough starter to Facebook photos of epic failed experiments, Americans are baking their way through a pandemic. “I find it comforting to make and eat foods I’ve made and eaten a hundred times before,” said Maya Kosoff, a freelance writer who has been documenting her baking adventures on Instagram. “It provides a sense of normalcy.”

Just as for Kosoff, baking is a creative outlet for many of those cooped up at home with more time on their hands than normal. But baking bread in particular also offers many a sense of comfort. A loaf of bread is familiar—the scent of baking bread is, for many around the world, a reminder of happier times with family and friends. Baking bread, as well as other delicious goodies, means participating in the creation of something that gives comfort not only to ourselves, but to others. Who doesn’t find joy in fresh bread straight out of the oven or gooey, still-warm cookies? Baking and the symbolic comfort it offers, both in production and consumption, can be a win-win for all who are isolated at home.

REFLECT:

- Do you find fresh baked bread comforting? Why or why not?
- What is your go-to comfort food? What about it offers you a sense of comfort?

- What role does food play in Christian spiritual practice?

Baking Your Well-being

Baking, and cooking more generally, offers more benefits than simple scrumptious food. Preparing food provides many with a sense of control and order in a chaotic world. “It’s both practical in the sense that it lets me provide something necessary and tangible for people—I gave my sister a stockpile of frozen soups I made a couple of weeks ago—as well as letting me imagine that I have some semblance of control in a situation that is very much outside of my control,” said Kosoff.

This sense of control is important, particularly in this season of uncertainty, as the lack of control can lead many to experience increased anxiety and poor mental health. With this in mind, baking serves as a form of stress relief. The phrase *stress baking* has been folded into the American vocabulary over the last several years. Baking, and cooking more broadly, as a form of stress management isn’t particularly new, but it’s risen in profile during the pandemic.

Science supports baking for stress management. In fact, the *Journal of Happiness Studies* found that “maker activities” like baking, cooking, and gardening are linked to more positive outlooks on life. Their study found that the cause of this positive outlook is that these activities occupy the participant’s whole attention. To bake well, you must be fully present, and that keeps your mind from stressing about other things.

“Baking is mindful. Mindfulness means paying attention to yourself in the moment and not being in the past or the future, but really being there,” said Philip Muskin, a Columbia University psychiatry professor and the secretary of the American Psychiatry Association. “[Baking] can have an emotional impact akin to practices that are intended to more directly affect mood, such as meditation or breathing exercises.”

It’s easy to be overwhelmed by news during the pandemic, and baking offers a clearly defined space where your attention can be directed and limited. In a culture that praises multitasking and efficiency above all else—even in the midst of a global crisis—baking provides a welcome relief for anxious hearts and minds.

REFLECT:

- Does “stress baking” appeal to you? Why or why not?
- Do you have a “maker activity”? If so, how does that impact your well-being?
- Mindful presence can be a form of prayer. What daily activities offer you opportunities for mindful presence?

Back to Basics

With home bakers eagerly attempting new creations daily, flour mills have struggled to keep up with the demand. King Arthur Flour saw sales jump by over 2,000 percent in March alone.

“We are making the flour as fast as we possibly can and shipping it to our customers, and it’s flying off the shelves as soon as it gets there,” said Brent Minner, marketing director for Hometown Food Company, which owns brands like White Lily and Arrowhead Mills. According to Minner, the market saw a 160 percent increase in demand since the onset of the pandemic. With increasing demands, production has been slow to catch up.

With most restaurants closed or limited to take-out—and many Americans operating with less income—making food at home has been on the rise as well. Baking and cooking are both skills that have gradually become less and less prevalent in modern life, especially as many women, who have traditionally done the bulk of this work, have joined the workforce. For many Americans, this meant cutting baking and cooking altogether.

But quarantine means endless hours at home without reliable take-out options, thus a home baking revival. Baking reaches into our primal past—the

part of ourselves that will always be concerned with procuring and preparing food. As food becomes scarce, or is perceived to be, that primal urge rises.

“The hardest thing to do is get people to make biscuits once,” Minner says. “It’s a skill that they maybe always have wanted to pick up but just didn’t have the time to do it, because they weren’t at home long enough.”

While many stay-at-home orders are beginning to relax, they are still in place in many places around the country, and time at home is no longer a barrier. Many Americans are discovering or rediscovering a love of baking, which might be a phyllo-dough-thin silver lining to long days of isolation.

REFLECT:

- Have you tried baking something new during the quarantine? How did it turn out?
- How might the rise in home baking impact our culture once the pandemic has ended?
- How can an interest in baking help foster Christian community?

Return to Traditional Skills

Along with cooking, gardening, and many other traditional skills, baking has increased markedly during this pandemic. This move toward traditional skills may be a survival response to uncertain times.

“It makes you think, when you have to step outside the economic frame that we’re in, how long is that economic frame going to go on?” asked Karen Bates, who is pursuing a master in environmental education degree from Royal Roads University in British Columbia. “How resilient are you when that economic frame isn’t in place—what do you need to know?”

Picking up skills to help weather the uncertain future is a sign of resilience—the ability to bounce back. It’s an act of control amid chaos, and it’s picking up steam. Victory gardens are cropping up across the country, with seed retailers seeing exponential increases in sales. Canning and other home food preservation methods have made a comeback. Hatcheries are seeing spikes in baby chick sales—all indicators that many Americans are embracing old skills for a modern world.

“There seems to be a shared cultural value around cooking, baking that is coming out now—it’s normally sort of buried in our busy economic industrial society,” Bates said. “And then there’s that survival aspect—we realize we’re not masters of this earth, there’s this little virus that can take us all down, and how do we reconnect with being part of natural living systems?”

REFLECT:

- What traditional skills do you think are essential for survival in tough times?
- How can skill-sharing be a ministry of the church in this uncertain time?

Core Bible Passages

The Christian faith is deeply connected with bread. Taken from Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4, the Lord's Prayer is prayed across churches and denominations. In addition to praying for forgiveness and salvation from evil, we are instructed to pray for our daily bread.

Daily bread would have been familiar in the ancient Middle East. Bread was a common food, eaten with many meals and available to most classes in society. In fact, when Jesus takes bread and wine from the dinner table in Luke 22:14-23 for the institution of the Lord's Supper, he was using ordinary elements for an extraordinary purpose. Bread is simple, yet when blessed to the Lord's service becomes sacramental.

Christians who make bread, as well as those who eat it, are constantly reminded that this prayer for enough bread to get through each day is essentially a prayer that God will sustain us and support us. As we consider the rise in home bread-making, we should consider the Scriptures. We pray not for more than we need, not for storehouses of grain, but for daily bread. We pray that the daily bread is *ours*, not mine, bread for all. We bless bread and wine that it may nourish us, not just in body but in spirit. As Christians returning to the simple yet sacred task of bread-making, we should reflect on how the process and the product can nourish not just our families but our communities in body, mind, and spirit.

REFLECT:

- Where has God taken something ordinary in your life and blessed it to make it holy?
- We pray for our daily bread. How does praying for food for all shape your understanding of abundance?

United Methodist Perspective

With churches across the country suspending their in-person gatherings during the pandemic, there is renewed conversation around virtual Communion. A formerly hypothetical debate about whether or not a virtual blessing is valid has moved from the theoretical to the very real.

United Methodists believe that the bread and wine used in Communion become the body and blood in so much as it nourishes believers who are Christ's body in the world redeemed by Christ's blood. Communion isn't a memorial, or mere remembrance, of Christ's sacrifice, but instead is a holy mystery, where Jesus is uniquely present with all of those who take part.

Chris Ridgeway, cohost of the *Devices and Virtues* podcast, argues that in our modern technological world, virtual gatherings are real presence. "The imagined video conference call—not so much imagined anymore—is an extension of known relationships of the local body," he writes in *Christianity Today*. "Why can't the signs of God's presence—the bread and wine—and the signs of our presence—our smiles and voices—signify both the goodness of the embodied world and the reality of the spiritual one?"

Ridgeway makes a compelling point. When we gather online to worship, we bring our presence into a virtual space, transforming our screens into pews and creating worship together. Virtual Communion, then, can be understood as an extension of that real presence in virtual space.

REFLECT:

- How do you understand the sacrament of Communion, or the Lord's Supper?
- Why is it important to gather for sacraments? Is a physical gathering better? Why or why not?

Helpful Links

- An article from Christianity Today about virtual Communion: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html>
- A popular YouTube video about making sourdough starter from scratch: <https://youtu.be/Hw8qZWWia9w>
- An article about baking and mental health: <https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2020/04/12/baking-during-pandemic-stress-relief/>

About the Writer

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Sports and COVID-19

by Alex Joyner

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the postponement and cancellation of major sporting events worldwide from the Tokyo Olympics to the beginning of baseball season. What role do sports play in our sense of time and community? What spiritual significance can we find in our culture's investment in sports?



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Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks for this day that is ripe with new opportunities and ideas. Help us to be present in the moment and remember that we rely on you for our daily bread and in turn our very lives. May our hearts and minds be open to your wisdom and your guidance, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions. If you are meeting online via Zoom, consider using the screen share function to take the place of a markerboard.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Are there any bakers in your group? Ask them to share their experience, either as a longtime baker or as someone just getting started. Do they have any kitchen victories? any failures? If possible, share photographs.
- Everyone has a skill to share. Invite the group to discuss skills, gifts, or talents they have—particularly if they have come in handy during the quarantine.
- Read the article on baking and mental health from the “Helpful Links.” How does the mindful presence of baking mirror spiritual contemplation in the Christian life? What are other tasks that can provide mindfulness? How can these be infused with Christian prayer?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Pick a baking recipe for the group to try. Have everyone attempt the recipe. Take pictures and discuss outcomes. Collaborate on prayers to keep the baking mindful. If safe to gather together, share your creations together.
- Create a small-group cookbook with favorite pandemic cooking recipes. Add stories, prayers, or other meaningful tidbits.
- Consider bread as a cornerstone of Christian faith. Who could use “daily bread”? Gather to bake (if safe to do so) or have each member commit to bake a loaf of bread (or other treat) for a family in need. Have the group sign cards and distribute the loaves of bread in the community.

Closing Prayer

Holy One, you blessed common bread and made it holy food. We humbly ask that you take our common lives and bless each one to your holy service. Give us eyes to see the needs around us, ears to hear your calling, and hands to serve the least and the lost. We pray all things in the name of Christ, the living bread. Amen.