

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XVII
MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS
(Exodus chap. 16)

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came into the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (16:1-3).

Now this is really getting old! And if old for us, surely old for Moses, and if old for us and Moses, how much more so for God! When Moses and Aaron first returned to Egypt after the encounter with God at the burning bush and announced to the people that God had seen their affliction and was going to deliver them, “They bowed their heads and worshipped” (4:31). But when the two leaders approached Pharaoh requesting a brief sojourn to worship God and Pharaoh responded by making their work harder, it was “We told you so! Now you’ve done it!” and they reproached their leaders, “The Lord look upon you and judge, because you have made us offensive in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (5:21). When Moses reiterated the promise of God to deliver them, they would not listen “because of their broken spirit and their cruel bondage” (6:9). And so it went. In spite of their unbelief God visited the plagues on Egypt and with the last one he brought them out of the land, leading them with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. However, when they saw the chariots of Pharaoh bearing down upon them, they cried against Moses, “Is it because there were graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” (14:11). The Lord made them a way through the sea and stopped Pharaoh in his tracks, and the people sang him a great hymn of thanksgiving. Three short days later they were murmuring about water, and God not only showed Moses the tree that would make the bitter water sweet but led them to the oasis of Elim with 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees. No sooner

were they on their way again than the complaints resurfaced, this time in earnest, and this time from the whole people,

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Now this is really getting old—for us, for Moses, and surely for God. But before we look at the divine response, let us look more closely at the complaint. Note first that there is of yet no indication of real hunger. At the previous testing there was a real problem with the water. It was undrinkable. Here there is no such indication, rather is it simply stressed 3 times over that they are in the wilderness. They were six weeks into their journey, had probably exhausted any supplies they had brought with them and now, having left the oasis behind, they could see on wilderness ahead. The future was their concern. How could they trust God to get them through all the days and weeks to come? No, that’s not right; they weren’t even thinking about trusting God. They still saw in this only the hand of Moses and Aaron, and it was on them they placed the blame. “*You* have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Ouch!) “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full.”

Here is the real crux of the matter. Their hearts still yearned for the past not the future, for Egypt not Canaan. You can get the people out of Egypt, but you can’t get Egypt out of the people. Not only were their memories selective, forgetting their extreme hardship and the meager diet of an enslaved people, they imagined a luxury they had never enjoyed. The illusions of sin never square with the reality. They were facing a future they could not imagine and imagined a past that never was. Unbelieving, self-deluding, fearful of freedom, longing for bondage, they wanted to opt out of this whole redemption God had planned—and that’s not too far from where we are at times, which is why it is particularly appropriate, though not originally intended, that we should come upon this passage on the First Sunday in Advent. Once again we look to the future, to another year of our Christian pilgrimage and service and are reminded in both the Epistle and the Collect that we must cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of

light. We too stand between Egypt and the promised land and still have a pull backwards to the fleshpots of Egypt. The pull of unbelief, of sin, of doubt and despair is always there. The Christian life requires constant vigilance. “Wake, awake for night is flying.”

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But back to the story, the history which is Israel’s and ours as well. How does God respond to this now old refrain, the constant doubt and unbelief, the short or non-existent memory of God’s power and provision? How does God respond? With patience and with grace. Immediately following the people’s complaint we read, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.’” He will not only give them bread and that in abundance, he will provide it every day and for as long as there is need--all the way until they enter the land of promise. Moreover, as they longed for the bread and the fleshpots of Egypt, God will provide them bread, manna in the morning, and flesh, quail in the evening, and none of it, as we well know, was because of Israel’s deserving. All is grace.

Just a word here about the provisions. First, about the quail. We read, “In the evening quails came up and covered the camp” (16:13). Quails are the smallest of pheasants and of striking, almost comical appearance. Before moving to south Florida we owned a home that backed up to the Wekiva State Forrest, and out of the sliding glass doors of my study, I would occasionally see a mother quail walk quickly across a short section of our lawn that protruded into the woods, a mother followed by 7 or 8 of her chicks, all marching in a straight line. It is a sight you never forget. It happens that quails migrate between northern Europe and northern Africa in the autumn and spring. Gören Larsson records that “One month after Passover [or about the time of year of our story], they are on the homeward route back to the north” and “every now and then, after the long migratory flight over the Red Sea, they descend totally exhausted to the coastal regions.” Then they can easily be caught.¹ “In the evening quails came up and covered the camp.”

Another well-known phenomena of the Sinai Peninsula is that the tamarisk bush which thrives there is invaded in rainy years by a species of plant louse which

¹ *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, pp. 114-115.

sucks the sap and transforms its carbohydrates into a variety of high fructose products. These are secreted through the body and fall to the ground as small drops. There they crystallize into small white pellets, which can be consumed like sugar and honey. Since they melt in the sun, they have to be gathered early in the morning, just like the biblical manna. Still today the Bedouins call them in Arabic *man*, which corresponds to the Hebrew word for “manna.”²

This would not explain the miraculous abundance of manna nor its constant availability for 40 years, nor its lack of appearance on the Sabbath, but we have seen again and again how God takes the natural workings of his creation and through his providence timing and divine intensification meets the needs of his people, as we will see a bit later in the New Testament as well.

The people were to gather the manna morning by morning, enough for the need of every person but no more, and on the sixth day enough for the seventh. God said that he provided this “to prove [the people], whether they will walk in my law or not” (16:4). Larsson sees three lessons being taught here. First, that of self-discipline. “The manna is the food of temperance. It shall be ‘your fill of bread’ (16:8), literally ‘bread for satiation,’ that is, exactly what humans need, neither more nor less.”³ St. Gregory of Nyssa makes the same point, somewhat more emphatically and with a broader application,

In this account Scripture after a fashion cries out for the covetous that the insatiable greed of those always hoarding surplus is turned into worms. Everything beyond what they need encompassed by this covetous desire becomes on the next day—that is in the future life—a worm to the person who hoards it. He who hears “worm” certainly perceives the undying worm which is made alive by covetousness.⁴

The second lesson is that of solidarity with one’s neighbor. “By the equal distribution of the manna to everyone . . . God further demonstrates the lack of distinction between poor and rich, weak and strong. Before their Lord they have the same value and are sustained by the same care.”⁵ St. Paul drew precisely this lesson from the chapter when he addressed the Corinthians concerning the need to give to the poorer brethren. He said, “For I mean not that other men be eased and ye burdened, but by an equality,

² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴ *The Life of Moses (The Classics of Western Spirituality)*, p. 89.

⁵ Larsson, p. 118.

that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want, that there may be an equality, as it is written [and here to make the point, he quotes Exodus 16:18], He that had gathered much had nothing over, and he that had gathered little had no lack” (II Cor, 8:13-15).

The third lesson was to teach the people to have total confidence in the Lord. The bread was not given in abundance, a week or a month’s supply at a time, but day by day. This was, of course, the lesson our Lord taught in the Gospel for Thanksgiving Day: “Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor for your body, what he shall put on” (Matt. 6:25). Then he pointed to God’s care for the fowls of the air, which neither sow nor reap, and to the beauty with which he clothed the lilies of the field. The thing is to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all the rest will be given. The same lesson lies at the very heart of the Lord’s Prayer. The focus is forward, on seeking the hallowing of God’s name, the coming of his kingdom, and the doing of his will. Then, on the heels of that comes the prayer for our daily bread, for sustenance that we might move forward to do his work.

God responds to the murmurs of the people with a gift of grace, the daily provision of manna, and instructs them that, as a memorial, an omer, a daily portion of the manna, is to be placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Brevard Childs notes, “A jar of manna which is a sign of God’s sustaining mercy is kept alongside the tablets of the law. . . . In New Testament terminology, the gospel and the law cannot be separated.”⁶ Now the Ark of the Covenant was hidden before the destruction of the first Temple, and the jar of manna with it. The Jewish hope was that the Ark would be restored upon the arrival of the Messiah, and, at the same time, they would see the reappearance of the manna. “The manna became an integral part of the messianic hope for a renewed miracle of manna, when the Lord once again will feed his people with bread from heaven.”⁷

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John a multitude of the people has followed Jesus to the far side of the Sea of Galilee, and being a great distance from any town had no supply of food, nor, were such available, did they have money to buy it. Jesus turns to Philip and asks him, “How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” This he

⁶ *The Book of Exodus*, p. 292.

⁷ Larsson, p. 116.

said to test him, for he himself knew already what he would do. Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a little” (John 6:5-7). (Do you begin to see a parallel with the story in Exodus?) Then follows the miracle of the feeding of five thousand from the available but woefully inadequate supply, the five barley loaves and two fish belonging to a small lad, and, at the end of the feeding, the people exclaim, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14), a reference to the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 (vv. 15 & 18) that God would raise up a greater Moses. And this Moses, this prophet, the Word of God incarnate, would be himself the bread from heaven, bread for the soul and not the body, bread that sustains with the life that is eternal. “I am the living bread which came down from heaven,” he cried, “If any one eats this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever” (6:54-58). The long-awaited Prophet, even the Messiah, has come, and the Lord will once again feed his people with bread from heaven.

Thus it is that we, sensing our hunger and knowing our need, come in absolute dependence to feed this day once again on the manna from heaven, “the bread of angels,” as the psalmist has it, on the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the bread of the world, the food of life eternal.

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