

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 5, 2018
Pentecost 11
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 78:14-25
Ephesians 4:17-25
John 6:24-35

Our Old Testament lesson from Exodus finds the children of Israel continuing their journey toward Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land after they have been liberated from slavery in Egypt.

They have just left Elim, where there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees, and have now arrived at the wilderness of Sin. There are no palm trees and no water, because it is a wilderness!

When life gets rough and the journey gets hard, the natural inclination of people (like us) is to complain. And things are no different here. The text tells us that 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. (Ex. 16:3)

It seems that the children of Israel were content to follow God, so long as there was plenty of food. And, as the new Moses, Jesus tells the crowd in our

Gospel lesson that they are following *him* for the wrong reason. They seek him because he filled their stomachs.

At some level we can understand this. Food, after all, is the most basic of human needs. We need our daily bread to live. Food, then, becomes the most obvious of signs.

But we cannot survive merely on the bread of this world. We need something more. This is what Jesus tries to help the crowd understand. Referring back to the feeding of the 5,000, he tells them, “You want to be with me because I fed you, not because you saw the miraculous sign.” In other words, that feeding pointed to something beyond itself, but these people didn’t see it.

So, they say to Jesus, “What does God want us to do?”

Jesus answers: “Believe in the one he has sent.”

Their response to Jesus is very telling: “If you want us to believe you are the Messiah, show us a miraculous sign. As the Scriptures say, Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven to eat in the wilderness.”

Here is where we need to put on our first century Jewish lenses, so that we can fully understand this conversation.

In the minds of the people who speak to Jesus here, the manna that their ancestors ate in the wilderness was a special kind of miracle. They believed that the manna was not only miraculous, but *pre-existent*. They further believed that

the manna was a supernatural bread kept in heaven for the feeding of God's people. And perhaps most telling, they believed that when the Messiah would finally arrive, *he would bring back the miracle of the manna.* (cf. Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Last Supper*, 86)

For ancient Jews, the manna was not just a passing miracle, given to the Israelites during the exodus in order to make up for their lack of food. It was bread from the beginning of the world, from before the Fall of Adam and Eve. It had existed "on high" in heaven, before the entry of sin and death into the world.

So, when the crowd here says of Jesus: "Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe you," it is a fully loaded demand. In essence, they say to Jesus: "If you are the Messiah, bring back the manna; bring back the supernatural bread from heaven. If you are the new Moses, do what Moses did – give us the manna."

To which Jesus says: "I assure you, Moses did not provide that bread. My Father provided that bread. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

To which they reply: "We want that! Give us that bread!"

And Jesus says: "I AM that bread. I AM the bread of life." I am the supernatural manna, the manna that existed before the foundation of the world.

Now, the manna that the children of Israel ate in the wilderness, like the bread that Jesus multiplied for the large crowd on the hill, were signs of God's

Providence. They were signs showing that we should trust that God will always provide.

These signs pointed to their fulfillment in the Eucharist, the abundant bread of angels sung about by the Psalmist in today's Psalm. *This is the bread we should be seeking in our lives, not merely the bread of this earth.* But too often I don't ask for this bread. Instead, I spend my life and my energy seeking perishable stuff. I allow the culture *around* me, and my anxieties *within* me, to convince me that these *perishable things* are what I need most.

I thought about the children of Israel this week. I don't deny that as they travelled to the Promised Land from Egypt, there were times when things got tough. But I can't help thinking that those hardships were *opportunities* for God's people to examine their motives, to look into their hearts, and to trust God more fully.

And then I think about myself. My journey – and yours – is a journey of discipleship. We are on a life-long exodus from the slavery of sin and death to the holiness of truth and the Promised Land of eternal life.

And we know full well that at points along our journey, things can get rough. Times can be hard. And at times the all-too-human part of me starts to become anxious, stressful about how I'm going to have enough bread of this earth. And I wonder whether my hardships are opportunities for me to examine my

motives, to look into my own heart, and to trust God more fully. I wonder if my hardships are a chance to hear Jesus' words again: "Don't be so concerned about perishable things. Instead, spend your energy seeking the eternal life that I can give you."

One of the most memorable examples of this in my life came when I was a student at MidAmerica Nazarene University in the early 1980's. One day a Chinese Christian came to campus to speak in our chapel. He had been imprisoned and tortured for several years for refusing to renounce his faith.

In very broken English, he described how during a period that lasted several days, he was given no food, and very little water. He described how the pain became unbearable, how he thought he was going to die.

Of course, all of us in the chapel were silently asking ourselves the same question: "How did you survive? How were you able to make it out alive?"

As if he anticipated our question, he responded: "When the pain became so bad, and my hunger became unbearable, there was only one thing I could do. I remembered that Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." So I fixed my thoughts on Jesus, until I wasn't hungry anymore."

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, my prayer for myself is this: *Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.* In a world clamoring for the bread of this earth, help me Lord, to hunger for the bread of Life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.