

# WHAT'S THE MANNA?

## Sermon, September 18, 2011

### Text: Exodus 16:2-15, 31

In this passage from Exodus, the Hebrews are just starting out on their forty-year wandering in the wilderness; this takes place about six weeks after the crossing of the Red Sea. This was early in the journey from slavery to freedom, this journey from despair to hope, this journey from fear to trust. I've made this point before, but this historical experience of the Israelites has long been seen as a metaphor for all of the people of God. We are on our way to the Promised Land of God, having crossed the waters of the Red Sea in our baptism and leaving the old life behind. We are all somewhere between leaving slavery and fully entering the promises of God. Some in this congregation have only recently started that journey to freedom. Others of you in this congregation started out a long time ago, but wandered off on your own into the wilderness and have only recently found your way back to walking with the gathered people of God. Others have been here walking with God and His people here for a long, long time. One thing we all have in common is that none of us have "arrived", yet.

The life of faith really is a journey. At times it's a journey through some pretty rough terrain, and as such times you just don't think you'll have enough resources to survive the ordeal. Along the journey to this Promised Land, like the Hebrews we, too, may question and struggle to understand what God is doing. Some of us may wonder at times if we just got lost along the way somewhere. Some of us might wonder just who do we think we're kidding, thinking we could escape our past ... that we could escape our past enslavements, escape our former ways of life ... to be someone we are really not up to being. And, like the Hebrews, along the way we can run into some seemingly insurmountable obstacles, we battle some terrific giants, and we get bitten by some nasty snakes. Quite often we can grow tired along the way, very weary of it all. We think our resources are just going to run out. We grow impatient with the difficulties, the uncertainties, the sheer length of this wilderness journey we call life. Yes, I think we understand the mercurial temperament of the Hebrews more than we care to admit.

You may remember that shortly into their journey, the Israelites were pursued by Pharaoh's chariots, and were trapped at the banks of the Red Sea. They complained to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians!'" Note that no one seemed to be talking about the Promised Land, or freedom, or about the wonderful and miraculous power of God all had witnessed in the plagues which led to their release from centuries of bondage. All they are talking about is Egypt, that familiar, secure slavery they had left behind. They are frightened, which is understandable. It's an unfortunate human tendency that whenever people are scared we will, more often than not, trade freedom for security, even if that security is, in reality, a slavery. Moses answered then, as he answered them today in so many words, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and you will see the deliverance of the Lord." Moses told them to lift their eyes away from their fears, the fears which seem all too real. He told them to lift their eyes away from an accustomed but dehumanizing past. He told them to lift their eyes away from the security of a familiar but miserable routine. He told them to lift their eyes toward hope ... hope in the Lord's deliverance. And then one of the grandest miracles of all time took place: the Red Sea parted, they walked through on dry land, and then the waters crashed down upon the pursuing enemy.

In our reading today, it is now six weeks later. They had journeyed farther into the wilderness and just about ran out of food ... after all, they could only carry so much out of Egypt, and probably had to leave some provisions on the banks of the Red Sea as they scurried across. Again, they are understandably frightened. And again, the frightened people complained, going on about how "wonderful" it was in Egypt. "Moses, there in Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate all we wanted, but you have brought us into this wilderness and now we're all going to starve to death." (*They may as well have added, "Yes, we know God delivered us in the past, but what's God done for us lately?"*)

That phrase, "And the people complained to Moses," is seen a lot during the exodus. One main reason they complain, one main reason many people complain, is that they are afraid. Fear is often at the root of complaint. Everyone asks our leaders, especially after a crisis like the one that took place ten years and one week ago, or in the midst of what many think is a genuine economic crisis today, "What is it you are doing to make us safe? Fix this! Do whatever it takes to make us secure!" And now, as then, people are all too ready to accept what amounts to a loss of freedom, a slavery, as the price of security ... but that's another sermon. What people really want is to say, "Take our fear away!" But no human leader, no human spouse, no human parent, no human child, no human friend, no human anybody can totally alleviate all the causes of fear. Only God can cast away fear. One of the

best pieces of advice I've received over the years is that if you find yourself in a position of leadership ... be it in an office, a corporation, a church, a classroom, a family ... and you start to hear complaints, don't be so quick to rush and service all the complaining. Yes, address concerns where possible, fix things that can be fixed, but at the root of many complaints is a black hole that no one can ever fill. Part of that "hole" is due to our human nature that refuses to be totally satisfied with anything ... nothing is ever good enough (*and this side of heaven, nothing will ever be complete, whole, perfect*) ... but I think the larger (and darker) part of that black hole is fear. There are far more reasons to fear than any of us can ever fully address or calm down. Moses, I think, knew that. Moses knew he was just Moses, not God. He knew the best way, and really, the only way, to meet people's fears is to direct people to God. Time and again Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and lift your eyes to the deliverance the Lord will provide.' Salvation is not to be found in returning to some illusory safety of yesterday, which was really enslavement. Salvation is found in looking to the faithfulness of God along the way.

In today's reading, God delivered again. In fact, He literally delivered; He became the Heavenly Breadman (*how many of you remember breadmen who made home deliveries?*). Hordes of migrating quail blanketed the area that evening providing plenty of meat to eat, and the next morning a fine, flaky, edible substance covered the ground. God said to Moses, "I will rain down this bread from heaven for you each and every day, except for the Sabbath day." And for the rest of the journey, every day for forty years (*except for the Sabbath days*), the people would go out to find and collect manna, the bread which had fallen from heaven. Forty years it was the daily staple of the Hebrew diet. Numbers 11 tells us they would try all sorts of variations with it ... grind it in a hand mill, crush it in a mortar, cook it in a pot, make it into cakes. They would make manna soufflé, manna burger, and even manna-cotti. We're told it tasted like wafers made with honey. When cooked, it tasted like something made with olive oil.

And everyone had to gather their own manna. Six days you had to work and gather your own manna, the seventh day you rested from that labor. Besides feeding the people, God was also rehearsing the people in a weekly routine that included six days of work and one day of rest. One day in seven was to be seen as special, set-apart, even holy; you weren't to go out to the Manna Grocery that day ... after four centuries of not being able to observe a Sabbath, this was a merciful routine God was seeking to re-establish among His people. Also, no one could hoard the manna because it wouldn't last; you could only gather a day's worth, and twice as much on the day before the Sabbath. It was just enough ... just enough to keep you going another day on the journey.

It may be stretching the wilderness analogy a bit, but I think manna is a wonderful symbol for how God cares for His people along the way on this journey called the life of faith. We may be traveling together on this journey, but everyone has to gather his or her own spiritual nourishment each and every day along the way ... and twice as much on a particular day. This is why participation in worship AND the practice of a daily devotional life is so helpful. As we begin the week and as we begin the day in prayer and reading and hearing and singing God's word, we find the nourishment we need ... and often we will find it is just enough to keep us going.

As we are told in the footnote to that final verse I read, a literal translation of *manna* is, "What is it?" That's what the word "manna" means in the Hebrew. "What is it?" The first time they saw it on the ground, they all asked, "What is it?" And the name, which was really a question, stuck. Every morning the Hebrews would gather the "what is it," and later the women would prepare it, place it on the dinner table, and their husbands and children would look at what was on the table and ask, "What is it?" And the wives would say, "Right!"

Their daily nourishment each and every morning was found in a question. "What is it?" And each and every day our spiritual nourishment needs to be rooted in the same question. In daily prayer and Scripture study we stop for a time on our journey, and we gather manna. "What is it, Lord? What is it you are doing? What is it you want me to do? What is it you are asking me to leave behind? What is it that you are calling me to become? What is it Lord?" That should be the daily staple, the daily question, of anyone on the journey who fears running out of resources, running out of resolve or resolution. As time and again we run into obstacles and fears and disappointments and detours in this wilderness journey we call life, as time and again life asks for more than we seem to have to give to it, we gather our spiritual nourishment by coming to God, placing our lives and the lives of those we love in His hands and asking, "What is it, God? What is it you are doing? What is it you want me to do? What is it you are asking me to leave behind? What is it you are calling me to become? What is it Lord?" As we read, as we pray, think, "What's the Manna?"

As we do that, we turn our eyes away from yesterday, away from past enslavements, away from approaching fears, away from the dreaded thought of not making it, and we turn toward the promised deliverance of the Lord. When we do that, He does deliver, and the "what is its" of His divine insights and directives and nourishing assurances will guide us one day at a time.