

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

August 2, 2015

“Snow in August?”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are we there yet?

Has it been five minutes?

How much longer until we get to the beach?

When can we stop and go to the bathroom?

Have you ever heard any of those questions before? These questions are the not-so-musical refrain of vacation travel. We want to get away. We’ve got to get away. But when you’re traveling with children, these are the questions asked and heard. And asked and heard. And whined. And heard. And sometimes, the people that are asking those questions are the children. But usually not.

The Israelites complained. All of them.

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exodus 16:2-3, NRSV)

I’m sure Moses and Aaron felt considerably worse than two parents in the front seat of a minivan.

*We’ve brought you out of slavery! We’ve saved you from oppression! Can’t you appreciate me for once in your life?*

Yeah, but when are we going to eat?

Whine, whine, whine.

It would have been better for God’s own hand to kill us in the land of Egypt, because at least there we had enough to eat.

What a relief it must have been to Moses when God promised to rain down bread from heaven! Maybe the people would believe and be more cooperative! But if he had already gotten them out of Egypt, with God's apparent and miraculous help, why didn't they believe already?

Sure enough, in the morning, when the layer of dew lifted, there was a flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. Was it snow? Probably not in this climate. They did not know what it was. Right there, in front of their tents. Had they not noticed it before? Had they not woken early enough to see the dew evaporate? Was there a change of season happening - where dew would be more obvious?

So they asked one another, "What is it?"

*According to Wikipedia – The word Man-hu - Man is possibly cognate with the Arabic term man, meaning plant lice, with man hu thus meaning "this is plant lice",<sup>[15]</sup> which fits one widespread modern identification of manna, the crystallized honeydew of certain scale insects.<sup>[15][17]</sup> In the environment of a desert, this honeydew rapidly dries due to evaporation of its water content, becoming a sticky solid, and later turning whitish, yellowish, or brownish;<sup>[15]</sup> honeydew of this form is considered a delicacy in the Middle East, and is a good source of carbohydrates.<sup>[17]</sup> In particular, there is a scale insect that feeds on tamarisk, the Tamarisk manna scale, which is often considered to be the prime candidate for biblical manna.<sup>[18][19]</sup>*

So, in other words? What exactly was Manna? Manna = tree lice poop.

What fascinates me then about this story is that their answer lay right in front of them. Every morning. Overlooked? Maybe. Arrived with a new season? Maybe. They complained for hunger and the next morning, right in front of them was an unknown substance that could be made into bread.

It's not the bread they had in Egypt. But it was the bread they had for today, for this season of their lives together. And it was right in front of them, something within their grasp. I know myself and my own complaining. I would struggle to see that this flaky substance could be made into bread because I'd say, it doesn't look like the flour we used in Egypt. I might fixate on not having bread like I know bread to be and not be able to see the gift of what I have in this flaky substance.

Plan A is flour and oil for bread. I'm looking for God to provide Plan A. That's what I've prayed for - or complained about which is truer to this story. And since I want Plan A, someone has to show me that Plan B is what God has provided. Plan B is an unknown flaky substance that when

ground and baked tastes like honey. Plan B, also known as God's answer to complaining, comes every morning.

Are we at all like the Israelites? Perhaps you might feel that we as the church are in some sort of wilderness and you might well yearn to be back in the “good old days” when people came to church, it was just the thing to do, and there were lots of people to help in ministry. Maybe you are feeling like you are in the middle of the wilderness in your life with your family, with your life at work, or with something else all together. Do you feel a little whiney? That’s where the Israelites are today.

That was what happened with the people of Israel in our Old Testament lesson this morning. On the first day that the manna arrived, they all stood around wondering what it was. It was bread, bread from heaven. It was nourishment for them. It would give them sustenance and strength for the day—it was one of the greatest gifts that God has ever given his people, and they didn’t recognize it as a gift at all, let alone a gift from God.

Some of God’s gifts are easily recognized. We know the bread and the wine of communion are gifts of Christ’s presence – of forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. They are nourishment and sustenance for us just as the manna was for our ancestors in the desert. The bread and the wine are holy gifts from God, and we readily recognize that.

We also readily recognize God’s gifts of love from and for our families, our friends, and our church community. We can see God’s hand in the gifts of nature—in the beauty of mountains and oceans, in the serenity of the forest or the beach, in the wondrous variety of plants and animals and the joy it all brings to us—those are clearly gifts from God. Some of God’s gifts are easy to recognize—some things we just know are manna from above.

Others of God’s gifts though, are a little harder to recognize. Some are unexpected or unusual. Some are subtle and easily missed. For example, God gives us gifts of opportunity all the time, though maybe that doesn’t always seem like a gift at the time. A chance meeting in the grocery store that offers us the chance to reconnect with a friend or neighbor—God makes that a gift to us. The phone call that offers the opportunity to forgive—another gift; or even the need that presents itself right in our faces, asking us to help now — even that God can use and make it be a gift for us. Free time, planned or unexpected, can be a gift from God. God can make even failure to be a gift. Sometimes God’s gifts to us don’t come clearly labeled and easily identified, but if we open our eyes and pay attention, we can see that even these are gifts from God, manna of a different kind.

Perhaps the most difficult of gifts to recognize is the manna given to us in the wilderness, those gifts from God that we receive in the midst of struggle or loss. And yet it has certainly been my experience that when I am in the wilderness, that God is most generous with his gifts. Some of

God's most powerful gifts come in the midst of struggle and sorrow. The gift of manna came to the people of Israel when they were in the wilderness, not in the Promised Land. As God did for his people then, so he does for his people now, giving us gifts of strength, compassion and insight, gifts of fortitude and perseverance, even gifts of appreciation, thanksgiving and humor. In the wilderness times of our lives God gives us many, many gifts—though in our pain, in our hunger, we may not recognize them.

Jesus understood human hunger—our need to be fed, not just physically, but also spiritually, our hunger and need to experience God through our senses, and not just through ideas or intellect. Do you remember the story of the walk to Emmaus? Two of the disciples were walking to Emmaus from Jerusalem, right after the resurrection, walking with Jesus, but they didn't recognize him. On that road to Emmaus, they were so confused about the events that had just happened that they missed the fact that Jesus was walking right alongside them! They walked for nearly seven miles with the risen Lord without recognizing him. Like them, we, too, become so burdened, distracted, overwhelmed and grief stricken by the world, that we become blind to God's presence beside us. The story goes that the Emmaus couple invited the risen Jesus to share a meal with them, and at the moment he broke open the loaf of bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Each time we celebrate communion, we are meant to have our own Emmaus moment, and as the bread is broken at our table, our eyes can once again see clearly and recognize God-with-us. In giving us the practice of communion, Jesus invites us to taste and smell and see, to eat, to be nourished, to recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Our spirits are fed even as our bodies are, also. We become one with him and with one another, and ultimately we are sent out from the table to become bread for others.

Sometimes our approach to communion is too tame. Too numb. Too blah. Often times we fail to recognize the significance of it. We have become numb to its potential for feeding our souls. This meal will change your life, friends! I hope and pray that today, as you come forward to our dinner table, you will have an experience like the people did with Jesus on their walk to Emmaus. That your eyes will be opened, and you will recognize Jesus here and among us. We give thanks to God for this life enriching food that gives strength to the weary. Thanks be to God. Amen.