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25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
21 September 2008

O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.
Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

MANNA…FROM CATERPILLARS

EXODUS 16:2-15

The Exodus leads to this: a desert, in the middle of nowhere? No, no, no, we did not sign up for this. Remember the glossy ad in the travel agent's office---the milk, the honey? That is what we had in mind. Not this, not now. Moses, you promised. You said that God promised. You said, "Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that God accomplished for you today." Well, that was yesterday; this is today. Excuse me, sir. Which way is Egypt?

One of the advantages of following a particular strain of the Revised Common Lectionary is that it gives us a chance to look at different scenes of the same story beside each other (of course, every story in Scripture is part of the same story; I am speaking of the stories within the story); and the story here seems to be amnesia and/or impatience. Scripture says that the whole congregation is grumbling. Well, at least they agree about something!

The pomp and circumstance of the Exodus has given way to complaining: "If only we had died in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread." Emancipation from slavery? It is a blur, a fading memory; and by the way, nobody feels free. Israel is faint. God's covenant people are hungry, and the way to their hearts is through their stomachs, at least for now.

Human beings are fickle. You and I change our minds. Sometimes our emotions lead; sometimes they follow. Sometimes we are proactive; sometimes we are reactive. Thanks be to God that we are emotional. Thanks be to God that we feel, and yet let us recognize that for everything we feel, there is an equal and opposite feeling. The joy of the Exodus leads to the dryness of the desert,

and the dryness of the desert leads to the wetness of milk and the thickness of honey, and may God forgive us when we are short-sighted. May God forgive us when refuse to look or are incapable of looking beyond the desert!

If the behavior that I am describing sounds like sin, it is because it is. Despair, at least in our tradition, is a sin. It is the other side of pride. Pride ignores the fact that God is God by suggesting that what we accomplish is what we accomplish, and God is incidental to the process. Despair ignores the fact that God is God by not even entertaining the possibility that God is with us in our darkest hours and that God will lead us through them.

Human nature being what it is, I suspect that at least one Israelite somewhere along the way suggested that the Exodus was somehow achieved; and if that way of thinking caught on, it is easy to understand why God's covenant people are despairing in the desert. Pride and despair differ from anxiety and depression (which are not considered sin), but a parallel exists in that it is difficult to imagine one without the other. Pride goeth before the fall. Without anxiety, there is no depression.

And there is another, obvious, explanation of why Israel is grumpy. They are hungry. It has been a while since breakfast or lunch or dinner. It has been so long since they have eaten that they have forgotten exactly when it was. Now Moses finds himself thumbing through notes from that leadership conference he attended, because God knows he is going to need them. Yes, God knows. Scripture says so: "Then the Lord says to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.'" God describes this as a quiz, as a test, to find out where the whole congregation of Israel is with respect to its journey, with respect to its *faith* journey.

With this Word from the Lord, Moses steps out and then steps aside proclaiming ever so boldly to all who will listen that the Lord will provide. The not-so-subtle implication is, "and when the Lord provides, you will be embarrassed," because your grumblings are not against Aaron and me but against the Lord. How do you like that rhetorical strategy? The next time that someone questions your

authority at church point the finger at God. Actually, that is marvelous, potentially life-changing, strategy, because every time we look to the cross, if only to point, we catch a glimpse of a crucified Christ, whose story points beyond death to life and life abundantly.

Moses and Aaron gather the congregation together. When a congregation gathers, there is noise, and somewhere midst the noise is the voice of God guiding covenant people, covenant children, to the place that God would have them go, which, as difficult as this is to accept, sometimes feels like a desert; and yet God is still there. Notice the recurring cloud imagery in Exodus. Moses speaks to Aaron, and the Lord speaks to Moses: "And as Aaron speaks to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they look toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appears in a cloud." More glory, more clouds, less noise…

The glory of the Lord appears in a cloud, and yet clouds are commonly associated with darkness, with feelings of isolation or a growing sense of doom. The glory of the Lord appears in a cloud in this story, because the dryness of the desert dissipates when it rains, and Israel's hunger subsides when manna rains from heaven: "In the evening quails come up and cover the camp; in the morning there is a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifts, there on the surface of the wilderness is a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground," and Moses declares, "This is the bread that the Lord has given us to eat." Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait: Why does Exodus say anything about quails? And what is the relationship between the quails in this story and the fine, flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground? Oh, no…say it is not so!

Every time that I read this story I am taken back to the first religion class that I had in college. The class was Introduction to the Old Testament, and it was taught by a Yale Ph.D. and a master organist. Being raised in rural churches in the Deep South, I was not prepared to study Scripture critically, and unfortunately, much of what I had been taught about faith was contingent upon the Bible being "all the way right or all the way wrong." I do not subscribe to that particular position now, and I

find the distinction between fact and truth to be incredibly helpful when interpreting Scripture; and, of course, all Scripture is interpreted, even as it was written, even as it was edited. Remember I came to this knowledge as an adult and with some reluctance, because faith too often is like Linus' thumb and blanket: something that we suckle when asked a tough question that we would rather not answer, as something to grasp when we feel anxious or as something to hide beneath when we would rather disappear.

So there I am in this Old Testament class. It is early in the semester, and I am already feeling off-balanced after being introduced to the editorial process that gave us the Bible. Then, the professor, as he often did, busts into the classroom and announces, "Quail droppings…manna from heaven…from quails." This was his greeting, not "good morning" or "welcome" or "How are you?" But: "quail droppings." Until this class, I thought manna was bread, bakery fresh, communion grade, bread, and he gives me this, at these tuition prices. His practice was to be as provocative as possible when introducing an argument, blast us with the evidence and use his sense of humor to lift us up after having taken the wind out of our sails. A strange method of pastoral care, I know, but effective, at least for me, as I am in the habit of laughing away stress.

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp: "Uh, oh," I thought, "but this is manna imported…by quails…from Italy or France or heaven." A classmate proposed an alternative interpretation, at which time the professor explained that there are scholars who attribute the appearance of this "fine, flaky" substance to caterpillars indigenous to the region. But this did not help. At least quails are present in the actual text! Nowadays, the prevailing alternative interpretation is that manna is, in fact, lice that puncture the fruit of the tamarisk tree, which produces a yellowish-white flake or ball that bakes in the afternoon and congeals at night when the temperature drop. This manna tastes sweet, rich in carbohydrates and sugar. Not bad, huh? This thought is certainly more appetizing than what was suggested previously.

When interpreting Scripture, remember that the variable in the equation is not God or Scripture but you and me. If this observation unnerves you, then give thanks to God. Manna is not manna, because I say it is. It is not manna, because Scripture says that it is. It is manna, because God says that it is. God's understanding of manna may be radically different from ours; in fact, it probably is. What is the difference between manna and quail droppings? Perspective: God's covenant people regard whatever it is that God gives to them in the dryness of the desert as nourishment, as a gift. If the suggestion that this gift is quail or caterpillar-related is offensive to us, it may be because you and I have never been truly hungry. It may be that we have never experienced slavery involuntarily.

One person's manna is another person's quail or caterpillar or lice. To me, the objective is to cry out to God, as Moses does in this story, and to listen to God and to each other, like Moses and Aaron do in the wilderness, remembering that what God has to say trumps anything that any one of us has to say on a given subject. The Lord provides. The Lord provides through biblical feasts. The Lord provides through human relationships, even messy ones, and it may be that God is calling you and me to serve manna to a neighbor whom we regard as quail or caterpillar or lice. It may be that God is giving us manna, and we confuse it for quail. In Jesus Christ, God is deeply acquainted with us in our sin, in our sadness and in our grief; and what is even more amazing is that this grace that God extends to us is the same grace that the Lord extends to all who would receive him on faith. To Jesus Christ, who loves us and frees us from our sins to be a people, one body, priests and priestesses of our God; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.