

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Lent IV

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First Lesson: Exodus 16:4-15

“Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily. And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the Lord hath brought you out from the land of Egypt: And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord; for that he heareth your murmurings against the Lord: and what are we, that ye murmur against us? And Moses said, This shall be, when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.

“And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord: for he hath heard your murmurings. And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not

what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.”

Second Lesson: John 6:27-40

“... Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not. All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Body:

The literature of the world abounds in stories of journeys, most of which are metaphors for life. From the travels of Ulysses to Siegfried’s *Rhine Journey* to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the hero encounters dangers, distractions, and obstacles to be

sources we need to avoid the dangers, distractions, and obstacles that the world confronts us with every day.

The Jews often faltered and disobeyed, just as we do, but God did not abandon them. Neither will God abandon us.

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God has also provided us with rules to live by and the organizational structures that the church has developed.

The words of God were first written on tablets of stone and were later expanded and written into what we call “The Old Testament”. We have received those words and expanded them further into what we call the “The New Testament.” These writings are the founding documents of the Church, and, thanks to many scholars and scribes, they are available to all of us in our own languages.

Then there are the creeds which the bishops and theologians of the Church developed over many years to encapsulate what we are to believe.

There are also the Sacraments, and especially the one that reflects the manna story in the words of the concluding prayer: “We most heartily thank thee for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of thy Son our savior Jesus Christ.”

Finally, there is the privilege of direct conversation with God in prayer. This is no small privilege, because it provides both strength and direction to us on our pilgrimage.

These are the resources that God supplies for us as we travel a difficult road through life. Like the manna, they cannot be stored up. We must seek them constantly.

Just as our bodies will perish without a constant supply of nourishment, so our souls will perish without the kind of nourishment that this world cannot supply.

Just as our bodies will grow weak without exercise, so will our faith.

Like our Jewish ancestors we have to be ready for battle with hostile forces, and we have to look to God for the re-

overcome before reaching his destination. Life is like that. Life is a journey.

St. Paul talks about the Christian life as a race to be run. The author of Hebrews talks about the patriarchs as “strangers and pilgrims on the earth”. They see their homeland from afar and salute it. St. Peter likewise calls his readers “strangers and pilgrims”, which is to say people who are on a journey to a holy place. Jesus himself talks about The Kingdom of God as a destination at the end of a difficult road.

The whole Bible can be read as the story of a journey back to Eden, the paradise from which the human race was once expelled. Heaven is the new Eden, and The promised Land is its earthly representation. So the story of the Exodus is, in a sense, a microcosm of the story of the Bible as well as a representation of the journey that each one of us is called to undertake.

It is in that context that I would like to look at the Old Testament lesson for today and give it a symbolic interpretation, or, as the church fathers would say, a spiritual interpretation.

The journey of Israel to the promised land was a long trek through a barren wilderness. There were few natural resources to sustain them on their way. There were lots of rocks, enough rain to grow some short, scrubby vegetation which the animals could eat, and there were little springs of water here and there. In order to survive the Journey, our spiritual ancestors had to depend on resources that came to them from outside their immediate environment. They had to depend on God.

There were also bandits that liked to raid caravans. There were nomadic tribes that roamed the area with their flocks looking for forage. Israel had to be constantly prepared for battle.

You and I likewise have to have to be constantly prepared for battle with hostile forces both physical and spiritual, and we have to draw on resources that come from God to get us through this cultural wasteland in which we find ourselves.

As we journey toward The Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, The promised Land, the New Eden, which we sometimes call “Heaven”, we are passing through a land that offers us little to sustain our souls. Religion has been banished from public life in America. Our academic institutions are largely concerned with getting research grants, raising money, and promoting a political agenda. There was a time when saw their mission developing our minds feeding our imaginations and passing on the accumulated wisdom of the past. Some may still do that, but on the whole our institutions of learning no longer serve those laudable ends.

The theater, and especially the movie industry, is mostly concerned with special effects and gross behavior to the detriment of real drama. Industry and commerce are dominated by greed. Technology has advanced so far beyond the confines of morality that human embryos are created for the sole purpose of providing materials for research. Where can we turn to feed our souls and strengthen our faith in such an environment? Even our churches are more concerned with increasing their attendance and incomes than in offering a crucified savior to a world of sinners.

Just as God alone could provide His people with the resources they needed to traverse the difficult way to the promised land, so it is only God who can provide us with the resources to keep our souls alive as we journey through life in the world in which we find ourselves. The good news is that God will supply us and God does supply us with spiritual resources every day, just as He did for His people in their journey through the wilderness.

Let us look for a moment at what God did for those people. First He manifested His glory in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. By following that vision of Gods’ glory, the Israelites were able to navigate the territory without getting lost.

Then God supplied His people with water and food. The food was something they had never experienced before. They called it “Manna”, which means “What is this?”.

When hostile tribes attacked them, God gave victory to the Israelite warriors.

When poisonous snakes attacked them, and when a deadly disease fell upon them, God healed them.

God also provided His people with rules to live by – rules that were different from the rules other people lived by. And He gave them an organizational structure that enabled them to settle disputes and to allocate resources and to share the responsibilities of leadership. Finally, God gave His people rituals and ceremonial practices that would help them develop their relationship with Him.

Without all of these gifts, the Jews would surely have perished in the wilderness. Some of them did die, of course, just as some of us will die before the church as a whole attains the promised land and the world as we know it is transformed into the Kingdom of God. But the gifts were there for the Jews when they were needed just as the resources we need are available to us, and the church, though it will suffer, will prevail against the gates of Hell, even as Jesus promised.

What, then, are the resources God provides for us that cannot be found in the cultural environment we live in? There is still the vision of His glory, and that will keep us from getting lost as long as we focus on it.