

You Asked For It

In the name of him who set us free from our captivity, and who now leads us and provides us with everything we need for our journey to the Promised Land, dear friends in Christ: If you're hoping to be inspired by examples of the inherent goodness and nobility of the human spirit, then you probably know that the pages of the Holy Scriptures are the last place you should look. No, the stories of the Bible don't try to hide the truth. They show people as they really are – as we really are – incorrigible sinners: weak, faithless, ungrateful, irritable, rebellious, quick to succumb to temptation, prone to distraction, and all the while constantly complaining about it. This is especially true of the episodes that describe the Exodus of God's chosen people from Egypt to Canaan.

Consider: at first, we find them in hard bondage to their Egyptian taskmasters. There their lives are short and bitter. In their misery, they cry out to the Lord; and he, looking down with compassion, sends a deliverer in the person of Moses. Initially they are overjoyed that the Lord has sent help and they thank him from the bottom of their hearts. They even cheer Moses when he goes to face the Pharaoh, "Go get him! You are God's man on our behalf!" But things don't turn out quite as they hoped. The Pharaoh of Egypt proves to be more stubborn than they anticipated, and he makes their burdens heavier than before. Rather than continue to trust in the Lord and his sent deliverer, they turn on Moses. "Why couldn't you leave well enough alone? We were happy just the way things were!" Funny, that's not what they said before Moses came. But anyway, even though they'd lost faith, Moses proceeds with God's plan. Nine plagues later and the Pharaoh is beginning to have doubts about the wisdom of insisting that his Hebrew slaves stay. Some people are slow to take a hint. He finally makes up his mind when the last plague falls. One morning he awakes to discover that all the firstborn of Egypt (including his own son) have died during night. There arises such a cry throughout his land that he is compelled to let God's people go.

The Israelites, for their part, have been protected from this final plague by the blood of the lambs that Moses instructed them to put on their doorposts. Now they are free, and they begin to sing the Lord's praises. "Who has ever imagined a God as great and powerful as the Lord we serve?" they shout in their songs, "The Lord God who has saved us with a mighty hand and his outstretched arm." Their songs of joy and confidence do not last very long, though. Shortly after their departure, the Pharaoh changes his mind. The idea of the sudden labor shortage disturbs him: might be bad for the economy so recently shattered by all those plagues. So he sends a horde of war chariots after his erstwhile slaves. God's people find themselves pinned between the attacking soldiers and the Red Sea. With apparently nowhere to go, they panic, "Oh, what fools we've been! Would that we'd stayed in good old Egypt! We were happy and content there. But now the Lord has brought us out here the desert in order to slay us all by the sword of Pharaoh." Of course, you know the story: Moses parts the Red Sea and they cross to the other side on dry ground. When everyone is safely on the far shore, the walls of water collapse and the sea covers the pursuing Egyptians. And as soon as it does, the music starts again. "What a great and wonderful God we've got! There is no other god like him! Nothing, not even mighty armies and wide oceans, can stop him from taking us to the Promised Land just as he said he would."

And you'd think that by now they'd be sure of that; but as it turns out, they're not. A few days later their water supply runs low, and they're right back to accusing God of bringing them into the desert to die – this time by dehydration. When finally, they come upon a spring, they think maybe it's going to be all right after all; but then they taste the water and find it to be brackish and unfit to drink. The grumbling begins at once: "What a cruel God we have. Can you believe it? Now he's trying to poison us!" Through Moses the Lord miraculously cleanses the water and makes it potable. Cheers from the thirsty crowd, and the Lord is number one on the charts again. But do you suppose it lasts? Of course not, for I'm sure you've detected the pattern by now. This time it's a food shortage. Now the Lord is trying to starve us all to death. "Oh, why did we ever leave our happy homes in bountiful Egypt? There we enjoyed easy, carefree days and feasting every night! Now we're doomed, d'ya hear? Utterly doomed!" The Lord responds by sending them the manna – the bread from heaven. And not just once, mind you, but every day. In the mornings when they wake up,

breakfast, lunch, and dinner is lying on the ground like a blanket of snow all around their camp. All they have to do is pick it up by the handful. So, every morning they have proof positive of the Lord's unfailing love and his unreasonable devotion to them – despite their constant faithlessness and evil accusations against him. It's as if this daily blanket of white the Lord sends them not only covers the ground, but that he uses it to cover their ingratitude and their sins from his sight as well.

And I suppose that's exactly the imagery he intends. But you see what's going on here: by steps and degrees the Lord is trying to impress upon his people that they can indeed trust him. He's trying to teach them to walk by faith and not by sight. He's showing them that even when things look bad and they can't figure out how he's going to solve the problem they're facing, he will always come through for them. Over and over again he proves it, and then he sets them up with another test to see if they've got it yet. And every time, at least through all the episodes we've covered so far, they flunk the test. And of course, by studying these stories and seeing how the Lord works with his people, we're supposed to learn precisely the same lesson so that when our times of testing come, as they surely do and will, we will fare better than they did. Unfortunately, very often we don't. In the face of adversity, want, or need we often find ourselves acting like our spiritual ancestors and suffering a crisis of faith.

But the crisis of faith we heard about in this morning's Old Testament lesson is of a different sort altogether. This time the people's bitter complaining against the Lord has nothing to do with some kind of shortage or dire threat that they're up against. No, this time all their needs are completely satisfied. All is green light and systems go. But still there's a problem – a huge, monstrous, major problem, at least in the minds of the people. And what's got them so worked up? They're tired of eating manna all the time. And to fully appreciate this story, it's important to understand that it doesn't happen at the end of forty years of wilderness wandering. One might allow that a steady diet of manna could get boring after a few decades; but no, when this story unfolds, it's only been a few months since they left Egypt. They've only recently come from Mount Sinai where God gave them his Holy Word, and now they're heading for the Promised Land for the first time. If all goes according to what the Lord wants for his people, they'll be eating the rich and varied fruit of Canaan in just a matter of weeks. The manna is meant to be a temporary answer to satisfy their appetites until they get there – *but that's not good enough*. Though it is nutritious, tasty, and, according to the text, somewhat flexible when it comes to methods for cooking it, now they hate it. They can't even stand the sight of it. And once again, with exaggeration, they describe how terrific the menu was back in Egypt. But remember, they were slaves there. It's not like they were at the top of the gourmet food chain. And while it may be true that there was a bit a variety in their diets during certain short seasons, the fact is that most of the time they would have subsisted almost entirely on coarse barley bread or a cooked mush made from the same relatively tasteless grain. And even then, rare would be the day that they would have had *enough* of any kind of food to really satisfy their hunger. There was no such thing as a well-fed slave in Egypt. The gnawing ache of an empty stomach would have been a constant companion in their former lives. It's been only in the past few months that they'd been able to eat their fill every time they sat down for a meal.

But still they complain. "We've lost our appetite", they moan, "How can we be expected to tolerate this loathsome manna even a second more? Give us meat to eat!" And it isn't like a delegation goes to Moses and says something like, "This manna is pretty good stuff, and we're happy with it; but would you mind asking the Lord if he would consider sending us a little variety now and then?" No, instead we're told that whole families stood in the entries of their tents and wailed. So what we've got here is the temper tantrum of a spoiled child on a national scale: some two million people crying about the fact that even though their gracious God sends them a steady diet of bread from heaven each day, it's lacking a few of the flavors they crave.

When the situation is seen in this, its true light, we are right to be disgusted with the people's behavior. And even Moses fares poorly in the story. He throws his own little hissy-fit about how tough it is to lead such people. And while his complaint may have some merit, he too resorts to excessive theatrics. "Lord, you've made me the sitter for a big, bawling baby. I can't take it. If this is the way it's going to be, just go ahead and kill me now." And then when the Lord says, "They want meat? I'll give'm meat: more than they can stand. I'll give'm meat 'til they vomit it up all over themselves", Moses responds to the Lord with disbelief. "Where are you going to get that much meat, Lord? It's not possible." Think about that for a second. Here's the guy who parted the Red Sea wondering where the Creator of heaven and earth is going to

get a few groceries for his people. Hello? Moses? Did you forget who it is you're working for? No, there's no one in this story who provides us with a very good role model for faithful behavior.

But that doesn't stop us from imitating them, does it? What do I mean? Simply this: the story is about spoiled, ungrateful people who turn up their noses at the means that God has graciously given them to sustain their lives through the wilderness while they travel to the Promised Land. In a spiritual sense, that's the journey we are taking now. We are passing through the death shrouded desolation of this fallen earth on the way to our eternal inheritance in Paradise. And the means our loving Father gives us to nourish our souls on this journey are his saving Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. These things together are our Bread of Life from heaven. And just like the Israelites spurning the manna that kept them alive, we too often display our displeasure and contempt toward this life-giving Bread. Or even if we know better not to display it, we still feel that way about it in our hearts – which is just as bad.

And you know what I'm talking about: "Oh, it's *that* Bible story again. I've heard it hundred times before." "What, Communion again this week? Well, there's another fifteen minutes of my day shot." "Nuts. A hymn with seven verses. Do we have to sing them all?" "Well, at least the readings are short this morning. Maybe if we're lucky the sermon will be too." Any of that sound vaguely familiar? It gets worse. Every Sunday when I get up to preach, you know that sooner I'm going to discuss some sin in your life (like I'm doing now), I'm going to call you to repent, and then I'm going to point you to the Gospel – to the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world by offering himself as a bloody sacrifice on the cross. It's like clockwork in its predictability. But that's it: that's the priceless truth by which God gives us life through his Son; and we've heard it so often and now take it so for granted that it rarely fazes us. It's like telling a multibillionaire like Bill Gates that he won a hundred dollars in a lottery. Big deal. "Yeah, yeah, yeah: 'Jesus died for my sins.' I knew that. Now I'm bored with it. What else you got for me?"

A better question, of course, is "What else is there that really matters?" but that doesn't stop us from growing weary of it. And on account of it, many people avoid it. They just stay home as if they don't need the feast of grace that God gives us here. Or they're hit and miss Christians, skipping spiritual meals because they don't think they're very important. Funny, they don't treat their bodies that way. And which is more important, their bodies or their souls? But perhaps the biggest problem we face today is the temptation to crave something else. This is why people are flocking to the big mega-churches of Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, and their ilk. There they serve up meals heavy with sugary treats but short on sound nutrition. You'll hear all about what you can do to have a more satisfying life, but very little about your sin and God's grace to you in Christ. Oh, but it's fun. It's exciting. The services are more like high school pep rallies than the traditional, reverent, Christ centered sort of worship we are used to.

And this is happening even in our own church body. Rather than serve up the humble Bread of Life, many congregations are craving the leeks and cucumbers of Egypt. This is sad but true: while attending a recent pastors' conference at a church in the Des Moines area, we were subjected to some of the congregation's popular praise and worship music while we were eating breakfast. There was one song that went on for no less than ten full minutes. It had a mild rock beat and was accompanied by a visual of all sorts of swirly lights bouncing around on a screen in front of us. You weren't sure if you were in a church or a nightclub. Anyway, the only message in this whole song was "God is our friend." That was the total substance of it. Oh, there were slight variations, "He's my friend, he's your friend, he's everybody's friend"; but that's all there was to it. It's a nice thought, I suppose; but there's nothing particularly Christian about it. And a god who is somehow your friend apart from what Christ has done for us on the cross is not the God of the Bible. As I sat there listening to the song, I got to thinking about those Muslim terrorists imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay. According to human rights activists, they are being abused by having to listen to the music of the Red-Hot Chili Peppers. I thought if they really wanted to make them talk, they should play *that* song – but *that would* be inhumane. My point though is that in turning away from the nutritious Bread of Life, many people are pursuing worship forms that are the equivalent of diet soda pop: tastes sweet, makes you feel good, and no calories.

The good news is that many people are discovering that. It may surprise you to know that the average length of membership in those big mega-churches that try to cater to people's spiritual cravings is about two years. Like the Israelites stuffed with quail meat, people soon get sick of the lack of any real content. For

many, it only leads them to the next church down the road where they've heard new and exciting things are happening; and where once again, after a short stay, they find themselves sick of it. That's what comes of craving something new and different all the time. But others are discovering the richness that we have had all along and that we unfortunately so often take for granted.

And of course the reason I say these things is to encourage you to appreciate all the more what we do have. To those who ask for something else the Lord sometimes gives it – and then they discover too late that it's not what they wanted after all. In the end, it makes them spiritually sick. But here we have the Bread of Life from heaven. And if we allow ourselves to really taste it, we will see that it isn't as dull and boring as we sometimes claim. In God's Word, in the worship of the church, and in the Sacraments there is great variety. It comes to us packaged in stories, parables, hymns and psalms, prophecies, and proclamations. There are many stories with multiple levels of meaning and deep threads of connection that would take a lifetime to unravel. There's always something new to be tasted even in old stories you only think you know – and at the same time, there is always to be found in them the central and live-giving truth of God's grace to us in Christ Jesus our Savior. That's what we who are ungrateful, easily distracted sinners so much need to hear everyday. May God in his mercy give us always the grace to hunger and to ask for that daily Bread, for this is a prayer he loves to answer, and he will do it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!