

### ***“We Loathe This Worthless Food”***

In the name of him who was lifted up for us, dear friends in Christ: It’s easy to recognize the setting of this morning’s Old Testament lesson. It’s got to be some time after the Exodus, when God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt with spectacular signs and wonders, culminating with the crossing of the Red Sea. The Children of Israel are on their forty-year trek to the Promised Land, out wandering in the desert with Moses. And they’re chanting their favorite lament: “We’re all going to die! There’s no bread! There’s no water! And we loathe this worthless food!” (That would be the “Manna” that came from heaven every day.) “Oh, why did we ever leave good ol’ Egypt where life was so good? Surely, God brought us out into this wasteland only to let us die.” ...No, there’s no trouble knowing where we are in Israel’s history.

But if I asked you to identify *when* in the forty years of desert wanderings this episode took place, you might be surprised to hear that it happened near the very end. This sounds like something you might expect in the first few months when there were still a lot of questions and concerns. But no, when this happened they were on the final home stretch. The forty-year delay God assigned them because of their faithless refusal to take the land when he first offered it to them was almost over.

What happened was that just as they were drawing close to their goal, they were denied permission to pass through the land of the Edom. The people who lived there, knowing that the Israelites were about to begin a campaign of conquest and occupation, were reluctant to let some two million people with a 600,000-man army pass through their country. They were afraid that if they did, they might be first on the list of conquered nations. And even if they weren’t, the thought of two million people tromping through their land and using up their precious water supplies and helping themselves to the just now ripening fruit of their orchards and vineyards didn’t appeal to them. They denied passage to Israel. So the Israelites had to go around that country, adding several days to their trip.

That’s what provoked the temper tantrum we heard in the text. But I want you to think about that. Consider: they’ve been in the desert for forty long years. They’ve been living in a place where without God’s constant care and provision they couldn’t have lasted two days. Instead, every single day God miraculously provides both food and water in a place where there’s none. Beyond that, for forty years, no article of clothing in their possession, including the sandals on their feet, has shown any sign of aging or wear. The two greatest challenges people in the ancient world faced every day, and on which they normally would have devoted the vast majority of their time, getting food and staying clothed, were completely taken care of. The hardest work these people ever had to do was go out and gather their food, Manna and quail, in handfuls up off the ground. Better than two thirds of the group has never known life any other way. And the few old timers who have distant memories about life in Egypt, also should remember the back-breaking labor, the sting of the lash, the meager slave rations, and the way the Egyptians kept their population down to a manageable size by throwing their baby boys into the Nile river.

You’d think the fact that God took Israel out of that terrible situation and devoted so much care on them for all this time might have made an impression on these people. You’d think that maybe, just maybe, they’d say, “Okay, God’s brought us this far. He’s taken care of us all this time. He’s certainly not going to leave us now.” But no: because there’s a minor

wrinkle in their expectations, because there's going to be a few days' delay and a little bit longer distance to walk, it must be that "God hates us and has abandoned us out here to die. It was his plan all along. There's no bread. There's no water. And worst of all, we're sick to death of this worthless excuse for food he gives us to eat."

Now, I'm sure you see how absurd their complaints and accusations against the Lord are. That they could possibly imagine after all this time that God was going to just let them die in the desert, and that they would have been better off staying in Egypt, simply defies reason. Their one complaint with which we might be able to sympathize is that they're tired of eating Manna. We think, "I'd be tired too of eating the same thing every day for forty years." But you need to understand that in the ancient world that was what everyone did anyway. Every culture had a staple food, usually some kind of grain, and there was little variation in the diet. For people living in 1500 BC, variety wasn't important like it is to us. For them, the question was not "*What's on the menu today?*" More often the question was simply "*Is there any food today? Will we get to eat?*" And many times, for all but the very rich, the answer to that question was, "No." That the Israelites had food every day – good, nutritious food, and as much of it as they wanted – put them in the same category as the richest people on earth.

And *that* was their problem. They were so used to living in God's grace and abundance that they completely forgot how it was living any other way. So now, faced with the tiniest setback, they lost heart and gave up their faith. They lost their trust in God who had proved himself trustworthy every day for all these years. They complained bitterly about the very gifts of God that kept them alive. They let themselves lose sight of the goal which was now just a few weeks away. And they forgot all about the wretched conditions they were rescued from to begin with.

And so, to bring their thinking back to the realm of reality, the Lord God sent snakes. Venomous snakes. Lots of them. We're told that their bite produced a severe burning pain, and then, after several hours or even days, death. It may seem a rather heavy-handed response; but then it had to be, because there's a very important message here: *Do not despise the grace of the Lord.*

It's worth noting that the Lord sent snakes, of all things. He could have used a disease of some kind, or fire from heaven, or scorpions, or something else; but he chose snakes. There's a reason for it. It's because in returning their way of thinking to where it belonged, he had another message for them – and for us as well. You see, the entire Exodus and the wilderness wandering and the occupation of the Promised Land was intended to be an elaborate illustration of the far more important spiritual issues of life. God calls people out of the slavery of sin, leads them through the wilderness of this world, and feeds and cares for them all the way. He's taking them to the eternal Promised Land. That's the picture. But wrapped up in their immediate worries as they were, the Israelites lost sight of that. They forgot the bigger message behind their journey. And so God sent snakes to remind them of what really was at stake.

Ever since the fall of man, when *the Snake* deceived our first parents, every person is born a slave to sin. But this slavery to sin is not like so many people think. As bad as slavery is, it's possible to survive in it. So, too often people believe they can just shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, I'm a sinner. That's the way it is. I'm just going to have to make the best of this bad situation and muddle through life even with all of its problems." But that won't do. Because slaves can live; but sinners cannot. Slavery is merely a picture of the reality of sin – an unpleasant, but bearable picture. A more accurate image of sin and its consequences is dying

in a desolate wilderness, your body racked with pain from the snake's searing venom. God sent these snakes to show the Israelites the *eternal* results of failing to trust him and despising his gifts of grace.

And the message should come through loud and clear for us as well. It's easy for us to look back on the Israelites from where we stand in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation, as New Testament Christians, and see how foolish, faithless, and short sighted they were. But these things were written for *our* learning. When we look at them, we need to realize that we're looking at a mirror of ourselves.

One of the great heritages of our church is the way that the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is preserved and taught among us in simple, straightforward, and unmistakable clarity. Jesus' words in today's Gospel, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" together with the passage from today's Epistle, "By grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" – these things have been impressed upon most of us from early childhood. It is the Manna with which God feeds our lives of faith. The vast majority of us have never known life any other way. The bondage of sin, with all of its fear and anxiety about the future is something we've never experienced. For us, God has always been the loving Father, and not the frightening, demanding judge envisioned by so many others. And it often happens that when someone from outside our tradition, who has no understanding of Christianity, or who comes from a tradition in which the Gospel is not so clearly articulated, is exposed to our way of expressing the faith that they are stunned with wonder over the treasure we hold in our midst. They often become some of the strongest defenders of our traditions ... until they've known it for a long time. Then, like the rest of us, even they grow complacent and forget what life in bondage was like.

And we, all of us together, who, having fed on this precious Manna from heaven for all these years while journeying through the wilderness of life, come to the point when we turn up our noses at God's grace and claim that we loathe this worthless food." How? We do it when we come to worship and think to ourselves, "Right. Same old Bible stories. Same old liturgy. Same old hymns. And wait for it, here it comes *again*: 'We're sinners, God saved us, Jesus died'; yada, yada, yada. Say 'Amen' and let me out of here." Or maybe we don't even get that far, and instead we stay home and think we didn't miss anything anyway. We do it when we view the Sacrament of the Altar, where Christ gives us his very body and blood that he sacrificed for us, as a time consuming inconvenience. We do it when we deprive ourselves of the fellowship of the saints because of petty squabbles with other members of the church. We do it when we deliberately avoid available Bible studies that really don't conflict with other pressing needs; we just don't want to be bothered. We do it when we neglect our personal devotions and prayers. And no, I'm not exempting myself. I do it when writing a sermon like this and think to myself, "They know the Gospel. What's the point of telling them again?"

And the answer always comes back: Because without this Manna, without this Bread of Life, we all die. Our loathing of this "worthless food" is a symptom that we've forgotten that. In a sense, we've become spiritual spoiled brats, so used to taking God's precious gifts that we forget exactly what they are, how much they cost him, and how desperately we need them. And this can lead to other problems, as we see in the lesson. Like when we encounter a minor delay or nuisance on our way and things don't work out quite like we expected, and we allow it to shake our faith. We accuse God of not caring for us. Or we allow the immediate concerns and sorrows of life to cause us to lose sight of the ultimate goal.

These snakes in the wilderness that we see in this morning's lesson are a reminder to us of our true situation. We *are* snake bitten. We are filled with the venom of sin. And we will die out here in the desert, short of the goal of our faith if we take our eyes off the cure. Because "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert" to cure those who looked at it, "so the Son of Man [was] lifted up, that every one who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already." The venom is going to kill him.

The lifting up of the Son on the cross is the only cure for the venom of the snake. Christ's body given for us is the Bread of Life from heaven that we need every day to feed our hungry souls. It's vital that we treasure and cherish this great salvation for what it is, so that we don't die out here in the wilderness like so many of the Israelites did. Therefore, despising our complacency, our spoiled behavior, and our willful neglect, let us repent of the ways we have treated God's grace with contempt. And trusting in his mercy, let us ask him to keep us in his grace, and cause us eagerly and gratefully to gather up handfuls of the precious Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever and as often as we have the opportunity. May he grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***