

The Lord Has Heard Your Grumbling

In the name of him who is the Bread of Life from heaven, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's reading from Exodus we find ourselves in the Sinai desert with the Israelites who are doing what they do best: grumbling against the Lord God. The issue at hand is a food shortage. The supply of unleavened bread that they prepared before their miraculous escape from Egypt – when the Lord struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians in the tenth and most terrible plague – that supply of food, which lasted about three weeks, has run out. Now they're hungry. And being in the middle of a barren wasteland, they are a long way from any place where food might be found. You'd think they might trust that the infinitely wise and mighty Lord who rescued them and led them out here has a plan to deal with their needs. But no. Instead, as with one voice, they raise the kind of lament exceeded only by current day teenagers who as a result of some infraction of household rules, have had their phones taken away for a time. "Oh, the injustice of the heartless parents! It's a moral outrage! A crime against humanity! A slow death by torture would be better than this!" Yes, and yet, somehow, in some strange phenomenal way, they usually manage to survive.

Anyway, back to the Israelites; from our vantage point and knowing how the story turns out, it's easy to condemn them for their overwrought theatrics. What's wrong with those people? Why did they act that way? But I think we should cut them a little slack. I mean, you know where your next meal is coming from. And the next ones after that for the foreseeable future. You're not worried about starving. They, on the other hand, like most people in ancient times knew starvation first hand. It was a constant concern. Every harvest the question loomed: is this going to be enough to hold us until next year? And if there was a drought or a plague of locusts or too much rain so that the grain spoiled or if some enemy appeared and stole the harvest, well, that meant tightening the belt and stretching out what little food was available for as long as possible. And recall that these people had been slaves in Egypt. They weren't used to eating high on the hog (or in their case, the lamb). Rarely if ever did they come away from a meal feeling full and satisfied. No, hunger was their constant companion.

So, try to put yourself in their sandals. Or ask yourself what it would take in contemporary terms to put you at their level of anxiety. Imagine that you are a Syrian refugee. Your village has been destroyed by war. The combatants are terrorists on one side and a corrupt government that oppresses you on the other. So you flee with your family with only the clothes on your back and what you can carry. You're looking for someplace safe to live, that's all. But those places are a long way off, and to get to them you've got to pass through places that are dangerous, where people don't want you, and thieves and robbers are more than happy to take what little you have and leave you destitute. If you're lucky, you end up in some overcrowded refugee camp where you might live for years as the long asylum process grinds through its painfully slow and complicated system. But you can't work. You can't earn any money. So you are entirely dependent on a shaky supply of foreign aid for food and medicine. Sometimes it gets here. More often it doesn't. So, what do you do? Well, when it's here, you hoard it. You get as much as you can and you hide it for later when there isn't any.

For goodness sakes, here in America where food is plentiful and cheap, it wasn't food but toilet paper that people were afraid of running out of. That was the big anxiety in the early days of the pandemic: not what goes into the body, but being able to clean up properly after what comes out. My point is that we aren't so very far removed from those Israelites in the

desert with Moses. Themz is us. Their grumbling against the Lord was simply a manifestation of their lack of trust in him – a lack of trust that we all have in common.

So while they and we richly deserve to be condemned for our weak faith in the Lord's loving care, instead of heaping scorn upon them, let's examine how the Lord dealt with their situation. He fed them. He gave them bread from heaven: manna that appeared on the floor of the desert each morning all around the camp – every morning except on Saturdays, the Sabbath – which, incidentally, had not yet been established. The Lord had his people practicing the Sabbath even before he told them what it was and how to observe it. From time to time he also provided them meat in the form of flocks of quail that would descend upon their camp in the evening. But the main staple was the manna. That's what they lived on.

We are told elsewhere that it was pretty tasty stuff, like bread baked with honey. It was also versatile: it could be eaten as is, boiled into gruel kind of like oatmeal, or baked into cakes on hot stones. Ah, but there were a couple of rules that went along with it. As I said before, six days a week it would show up in the morning, just as the sun evaporated the dew. By the time the sun got hot, say around 10 in the morning, it would disappear. So you had to pick it up early. No sleeping in. Oh, and what you picked up and put in your basket wouldn't disappear. You'd be able to eat it for lunch and supper too – maybe even for a midnight snack. But what you couldn't do is save it for tomorrow. You could only pick up what you needed for today. If you tried to store some over night, in the morning it would stink and be full of maggots. That was the case everyday but Friday. On Fridays you'd pick up twice what you needed so you could eat on Saturday, and that supply would not rot over night. Clever stuff, that manna, that it knew which night not to go bad.

The purpose of the Lord in using this method to provide food for his people is clear. By it he was teaching them to trust him. You deal with today. Take what I give you. Eat and enjoy. And trust me to take care of you tomorrow.

But we don't like that. We live by that old saying "a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush". That is to say, what you've got on hand, what you can actually see and count, is worth more than what you might get later even if it's greater quantity because after all, *you might not get it*. But what if the Lord told you that you'd get it, that he would provide it. We think, no, I want to see it. The Lord says, "Trust me. Believe in things unseen."

For forty long years throughout their entire time of wandering in the desert the Lord provided manna for his people to teach them this lesson. And sadly, they never did get it. At each little glitch, whenever things weren't exactly to their liking, they'd start the grumbling once again, complaining that the Lord only brought them out into the desert to kill them. And yet, somehow, in some strange phenomenal way, he managed to lead them safely into the Promised Land.

The question is: will we learn the lesson? No, as a general rule we are not food insecure. Like I said, you know where your next meals are coming from. But that does not mean that we are without insecurities, fears, and anxieties about the future. What have you complained about recently? Let me guess: government overspending is going to cause rampant inflation, wipe out your savings, and bring the country to financial ruin. Or how about this: we live in a country made successful and prosperous by capitalism, yet many seemingly bright and educated people are now saying that communism or socialism are the way to go – even though every place they've ever been tried have brought to misery to their people. But hey, this time we'll do it right! Or this: the current administration's foreign policies will ensure

that Iran gets the atomic bomb (which would be disastrous) and that China will soon dominate the world. Or this: we live in a society that increasingly is not capable of distinguishing males from females; indeed, it's thought wrong to make that distinction. That's today. What kind of craziness are they going to try to foist on us tomorrow?

What else? There's crime and rioting and homelessness and open borders and domestic terrorism and environmental concerns and the next wave of the Corona virus ... I could go on: but for reasons economic, social, moral, politic, maybe even philosophic, we are worried about the future. I've heard you voice your worries. I've heard myself complain. And do you know what? The Lord has heard our grumbling. And it grieves him to hear it because it means that we do not trust him. Now, I'm not saying that we can't talk about these problems we are facing and what we can do to try to solve them. But we shouldn't fearfully gripe about them as if they were beyond the Lord's mighty power to guard and keep us from. Nor should we throw up our hands in despair and ask, "What's the world coming to?" The answer to that question is that it's coming to an end. That's a good thing. And the Lord has told us that it's going to get worse before it does.

But that is not cause for alarm. In Christ Jesus the Lord has taken care of our greatest need. He gave us a Savior from sin. By his shameful death on the cross he conquered death for us, and by his rising to life he opened the way for us to the eternal Promised Land. We *do* trust him to get us there. We ought also to trust him for each day and every step along the way as we travel with him in the desert of this present age. That doesn't mean the going will always be comfortable or easy. Life in the desert was neither for the Israelites. But the Lord took care of their needs. And he will take care of ours. Instead of grumbling, let's trust him. And use our voices to give him our thanks and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!