

Pentecost 10, August 1, 2021 (Jo 6:24-35; Ps 78:23-29; Ex 16:2-4, 9-15; Eph 5:1-16)

Once upon a time God rescued a nation from slavery in Egypt. They'd been living there for over 400 years, and the more numerous they grew, the harsher became their forced labor.

You know the story of their deliverance. After God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, he and his brother Aaron confronted Pharaoh. Ten times they told him God's words: **Let my people go!**

Ten times Pharaoh refused. And each time, God punished the Egyptians with a plague. The final punishment was inflicted by the angel of death, who *passed over* the homes where God's chosen people lived, and killed every first-born male of the Egyptians.

After this Moses led the people out of Egypt through the Red Sea. It parted to allow their passage, and then flooded to drown the Egyptians who pursued them.

All of that took place in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. The reading from chapter sixteen today continues the story. I want to fill in some verses that have been left out.

As soon as they reached the far side of the Red Sea, the Hebrews began complaining to Moses. **Why didn't God let us die in comfort in Egypt? There we had stew and all the bread we could eat. You brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death!**

God listened in on this griping and said to Moses, **Here's the plan: Every morning I'm going to rain down bread from heaven around the camp. Tell the people to collect only what they need for that day, and there will always be enough.**

The first morning when the people went out from their camp, they saw God's gift and said, in Aramaic, *ma-na?* which means *what's that?* That's how *manna* got its name.

Some of the people collected more manna than they could use in one day. But the next morning, what was left was stinky and full of worms—and God was annoyed.

Then God told Moses they should honor the Sabbath by not working. That meant they couldn't go out to collect more bread. God said what they got on the sixth day would be enough for the seventh day. And what do you know: on the morning of the Sabbath, the leftover bread was still good!

But now that they had bread, enough for all their needs, the people wanted more. They wanted *meat*. So God, weary of their constant complaining, sent quail on the camp. (This part of the story is continued in the Book of Numbers, and also in Psalm 78.)

God sent quail, and the people *gorged* themselves on the birds. They ate quail till they were full. They ate quail till they were *stuffed*, literally. And then, when they were so stuffed the meat was hanging out of their throats, they died! God had had enough of their greed.

It sounds as if those Israelites in Exodus and Numbers were pretty dense. God said “do this,” and they did—sort of. God said “don’t do that” and they did it anyway. God gave them everything they needed, and they yammered for more.

We wouldn’t do that, would we? I mean, if Jesus showed up here and pulled out a loaf of bread and fed the whole congregation a satisfying lunch, we’d be content—wouldn’t we?

Surely *we* would recognize the miracle, and praise God for sending Jesus to provide for us so magnificently. Not like those ancient Israelites—or those Pharisees at the time of Jesus. I mean, a miracle is a miracle, right?

But the crowds pursuing Jesus didn’t seem to get it. They followed Jesus—who had just sidestepped the 5000 who wanted to make him their king. They followed him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus recognized their purpose: they wanted more free food! Since his purpose in becoming God-in-the-flesh was to provide *salvation* for the whole world, not full bellies, he told them straight out they were barking up the wrong tree.

Don’t work for the food that spoils, he said. Instead, work for the food that gives eternal life—the food I alone can give.

They thought they could *earn* that food, perform some special works required by God. But Jesus corrected their idea. **Believe in me, he said, because God sent me.**

I don't understand the next part. Basically the crowd said, *why should we believe in you? Give us a sign! Why should we put our faith in you?*

How could they be so blind? They just ate a full meal—5000 men, plus women and children—that Jesus provided from five barley loaves and two fish! There was even a bounty left over, twelve baskets full! Wasn't that miracle enough?

But no, now they wanted something that obviously came from God, like the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness—which they thought had come from Moses.

Again Jesus set them straight: **It wasn't Moses who sent the manna. It was God, my Father. And now he's giving you the true bread from heaven: the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**

Finally the crowd seemed to get excited. **Sir**, they cried, **give us this bread always!** And Jesus responded with words that underlie our faith today: **I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.**

When you receive the body and blood of Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, it doesn't fill your bellies. But it gives you so much more! The holy supper, the Passover of our Lord, empowers you to live the life described in Ephesians today, **a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient; bear with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This new life given to Christians in our baptism isn't something anyone can teach you. You have to *experience* it. You have to know the story—the story which shaped the entire lives of the Jews, the people of Jesus. You have to grow in it by *living* it. Sometimes you just have to *act* as if you believe, being obedient to God's law of love: love God above all else, and your neighbor as yourself—remembering that *love* isn't a feeling, but rather action, attitude, relationship.

The faith—the *bread* that is Jesus—never ends, nor does our growth in it. Hear again the final words from Ephesians today:

Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body—this body of Christ, this communion of saints, this fellowship of believers—from him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Your work, your next step, dear friends, is to receive what you already are: the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God!