

“Manna”

Joshua 5:9-12

Where is our next meal coming from?

In Wednesday night confirmation class, we were discussing how shepherds care for their sheep in the context of Psalm 23.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Our confirmands questioned the word “want”. So if the Lord is my shepherd then I’ll receive everything I want. The Browns will win the Super Bowl next year because that’s what I want. My next meal will be a T-Bone, baked potato, and green beans because that’s what I want.

Or does it mean that if the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want anything because the shepherd takes care of me. In “The Message” translation it says, “God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing”.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head, my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me everyday of my life. I’m back home in the house of God forever.

One day, long ago, the Hebrews, recently emancipated from slavery in Egypt and at the point of starvation in the wilderness, woke up to find bread from heaven! They called it manna, it came on a regular basis — not once a week, but *every morning!*

This went on for years! Israel's manna rations didn't include such ingredients as kale, fresh basil or Frank's Hot Sauce. But without fail, each daily delivery included a fine, flaky substance that "was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:30). The Israelites scooped the stuff up and baked it into cakes, the ultimate in convenience food for busy working refugees.

There was no shipping box, no freezer pack, no insulating liner. The manna arrived on the ground fresh, like shimmering morning dew. Its shelf life was limited to one day, so there was no stockpiling it for the future. But who among them was concerned about that, when the Lord delivered a fresh supply each day (with double, less-perishable rations on the eve of the Sabbath, to spare God's people the temptation to work on their day of rest)?

It's remarkable how often the Lord sends us just what we need, when we need it. It was true for the ancient Israelites, and it remains true for us today.

- When these holy wanderers were lost, God guided them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- When they were thirsty, the Lord told Moses how to strike a rock with his staff, calling forth a bubbling spring.
- When they were hungry, thinking back with longing on the three square meals a day their slave-masters had provided, God offered them flocks of quail, easy to catch, and also this unique gift of manna from heaven.

The word "manna" literally means "What is it?" Surely that was the question they asked themselves, when first they saw this crusty white substance on the ground.

Scripture tells us it went on like this for 40 years — an entire generation. Manna was the gift God gave the Hebrews daily, to preserve their lives. Some Bible scholars have tried, over the years, to figure out what manna was. There are all kinds of theories. Some say it was the secretions of certain insects; others, tree sap; still others, a sort of edible fungus that sprang up during the night. The bottom line is, nobody really knows. To the authors of the Bible, it's a miracle — and that's probably all we need to know.

There are some people who approach the Bible looking for scientific explanations for everything between its covers that seems to bend the laws of nature. That's how you end up with insect secretions and tree sap and wild fungus — not very appetizing, to be sure, but it's the best you can do, if you're bound and determined to send these stories through the wringer of the scientific method. Probably not even the authors of the biblical accounts understood them 100 percent literally, as certain interpreters insist on doing. No doubt those ancient writers had a healthy understanding of metaphor and symbolism, even if they didn't have such literary terms to describe them. The elegant image of manna from heaven is a powerful way of depicting God's goodness in providing all that we truly need in life. The preacher William Sloane Coffin has a wonderful way of addressing the subject of miracles in the Bible.

Here's what he writes: "Miracles do not a messiah make. But a messiah can do miracles. If you ask me if Jesus literally raised Lazarus from the dead, literally walked on water and changed water into wine, I will answer, 'For certain, I do not know. But this I do know: faith must be lived before it is understood, and the more it is lived, the more things become possible.'

I can also report that in home after home I have seen Jesus change beer into furniture, sinners into saints, hate-filled relations into loving ones, cowardice into courage, the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. In instance after instance, life after life, I have seen Christ be ‘God’s power unto salvation,’ and that’s miracle enough for me.”

There’s a substance in J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, that functions very much like biblical manna. Tolkien, of course — a professor of ancient literature at Oxford — was a deeply Christian man, a committed Roman Catholic. When faced with the problem of explaining what food the hobbits Frodo and Sam would find to eat as they crossed the scorched, volcanic hellscape of the land called Mordor, Tolkien invented a kind of manna they carried with them, a gift of the elves. It’s called *lembas*, a magical bread. Lembas cakes would keep for many months, as long as they stayed wrapped in a certain magical leaf. Even a bite or two was enough to sustain a weary pilgrim for a whole day. Lembas is a food for the righteous. Those who are evil — like the dark and twisted soul, Gollum — find the taste of lembas offensive. Gollum refuses to eat the lembas cake even when faced with starvation. This is consistent with Tolkien’s personal eucharistic theology, from his Roman Catholic upbringing. Pre-Vatican 2 Catholics were not supposed to receive the sacrament unless they’d first been to sacramental confession. They first had to be absolved of any mortal sins they had on their souls.

A Latin term for the communion elements that was common in the early 20th century and that would surely have been familiar to the scholarly Tolkien was the word *viaticum*, which means “for the way.” The communion wafer was understood as spiritual provision for life’s journey.

So, it should come as no surprise that Tolkien, in his novels, refers to the elvish lembas cakes as “way-bread.” For him, the communion elements are the Christian manna, delivered to believers by the hand of a generous God.

What we’re talking about here, in theological terms, is called “providence.” It’s not a word you hear so often anymore — unless you’re talking about the capital of Rhode Island. That city was named by its pious founder, Roger Williams. He gave thanks for “God’s merciful providence” in leading him and his followers to that place. This was after they were driven into the wilderness by the governing authorities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Those Puritans didn’t like Williams’ unorthodox theological views. The early settlers of Rhode Island didn’t discover any flaky white stuff on the ground, but they did find plenty of game in the forest and fish in the streams. That was manna enough for them.

It’s been said that “life is understood backward, but it must be lived forward.” Isn’t that so often the way it is with us, in times when we feel trapped by dire circumstances? When jobs are lost, when relationships fail, when sickness intrudes — even when we’ve locked the keys in the car — we may not think at the time that God is close at hand, guiding our circumstances. But then, wonder of wonders, we discover that we have what we need, after all. And we give thanks.

Such experiences are our *manna moments*. They may not always seem so at the time — but, later on, with a little distance to reflect back on the situation, a pattern of loving care emerges. We come to see the providential hand of God active in our lives in the most remarkable ways.

When that happens, the place we once imagined to be wilderness turns out to be a place of blessing after all. There comes a time, though, when the manna ceases. That's what happens in today's passage from Joshua, chapter 5. On the very day the Israelite people are bringing in their first harvest in the promised land, they awaken to discover, for the first time in 40 years — except for Sabbath-days — that no manna coats the ground! That's not because the Lord has ceased to be generous. It's because the people of Israel no longer need such heavenly intervention. It's not that the Lord has stopped providing: God has simply started to provide in a different way.

We are all partners with the Lord in this business called living. It's not that we are some kind of pampered house-pet — a cat or dog who looks for the supper dish to be filled twice a day. Surely there are times and seasons when we may need the manna, but God's purpose is to bring us to the place where we no longer need it.

Even then, if we expand our field of vision, we'll discern the Lord at work, guiding us in the very ways we provide for ourselves and our loved ones. All that we have is ultimately God's generous gift. Isn't that enough?

We gather at the table of the Lord. Here we consume not manna and quail, but bread and wine — for us, the body and blood of our Savior.

May the peace of God . . .

#480 – O Bread of Life from Heaven