

Sermon – October 20, 2024
“Bread from Heaven”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 16:4, 14-26

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit. Visit, fill hearts open to you and transform us into Christ's image through our hearing and your anointing of these words. Bless those with ears to hear and lead us out into fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! “The grass withers and the flowers fail,” “but the word of our God endures forever.”

About a month after the new nation of Israel leaves Egypt, they begin to grumble about lack of food. Israel seems to have run out of the provisions they brought along to eat on their journey. They are not starving or are yet in danger of starving, as they have large flocks with them on their journey. But they may be at the point where what they planned to eat has been consumed and whatever the bounty of Egypt may or may not have really been they now are remembering as the good old days of Egypt and what they once had in that place where they sat beside their flesh pots and ate to their fill. They begin to grumble about their situation, placing their memories of Egypt against their perceived lack of abundance in the wilderness and blaming Moses for their situation. They do not yet realize that God is with them and, even in the wilderness, the One who creates and sustains watches over them now for good.

Have any of you ever grumbled? I will confess that I am a lifelong grumbler and I think I am really good at it. I can grumble about anything. Whenever I find some perceived slight, I tend to seek others who are sympathetic to my discontent and grumble to them about the people I think are the source of my displeasure. I desire to be like Paul who was content no matter his circumstance, but I fall short in praising God for the blessings I have, and too easily, when confronted with a perceived slight, I grumble. As the bread the Israelites brought along for the fourteen-day trip to the Promised Land is exhausted and they fondly recall the abundant food of Egypt, they grumble. To help my own grumbling, I seek to spend time with Jesus on a daily basis and let his love fill me with gratitude and move me from grumbling to loving others. Pray for me.

If we have not already noticed, let me point out that God does not respond to the grumbling from Israel with retribution or judgment. Instead, God provides daily bread, food, for them. With God, the wilderness is not a harsh place of scarcity, but a place where God's love is demonstrated, and His nature is more fully revealed. Israel must learn to trust and obediently follow God. God will provide in this place of scarcity needed food on a daily basis. Israel must go, find this provision, gather it as instructed, and prepare it for their food. They have to be active and obedient laborers in order to receive daily bread.

With the coming of dawn the next day, the Israelites see something on the ground and they ask, "What is this?" In Hebrew, the sound of this spoken question is very close to the sound of the English word "manna." The word we use for the bread from heaven is basically the idea of what is this that God has given? As people go and gather this gift from God, they find manna is food with very special properties. Manna tastes good for all who eat it. It is not one of those frustrating Communion wafers that we used during COVID that tasted more like paper than bread. It is good-tasting food. Manna cannot be kept overnight or it will spoil and grow maggots. No matter how much or little one gathers, it is only enough for each person for the day, an omer, the measure used by Israel. No matter the amount gathered when measured, it provides what is needed for one's daily requirement for sustenance. Once the sun is high in the sky, the manna melts and is gone. One must seek daily bread early in the day and not wait until late, as it will be gone and those who waited will suffer want. Perhaps the most interesting attribute is that on the sixth day, the people are commanded by God to gather twice as much manna, enough for two days and some of what is gathered on the sixth day may be kept over for the seventh day. Manna

collected on the sixth day does not spoil but provides for the seventh day's daily bread. Finally, notice that on the seventh day there is no bread rained from heaven as God rests on the seventh day, and Israel is expected to rest as well. They will not be hungry when they rest on the seventh day as God has provided for them if they have obeyed His instructions for using manna. As God provides bread from heaven to feed Israel, so also Israel begins to learn about God's love for them and His nature: on the seventh day God rests and His people also are to rest. God's gifts reflect God's nature and Israel learns about God as they receive bread from heaven. We should also know that this bread from heaven comes for forty years, the entire time Israel is in the wilderness. On the day Israel enters the Promised Land and begins to eat the provisions they find there, the bread from heaven stops. If we have read ahead in our Bibles or remember Israel's struggle to follow God, we know that those who eat this bread from heaven die in the wilderness. This bread, as wonderful as it is, does not sustain one forever; its sustaining power is limited to a single day. That manna sustains for only one day points to something more: a better bread yet to come down from heaven that will sustain God's people always. God is in control even in the wilderness times of our lives, and as we journey with God through those times, God brings blessings out of bareness. God provides abundant loving care to His people.

Don't miss the daily and weekly cycles that are starting to emerge as Israel journeys with God in the wilderness. Every morning, the people go out and find the daily bread they are trusting God to provide. The bread from heaven is outside the camp, and they must get up early, go, find, collect, and prepare it to receive sustenance. Yet it does not come on the seventh day. On that day, the collection from the day before provides food. We have seen in Genesis the idea of Sabbath rest as God rests on the seventh day of creation. Rhythms of life for living in God's presence, provision of daily bread and weekly rest in His presence, are emerging and will grow as Israel begins to know God.

In chapter six of John's Gospel, Jesus is engaged with the crowd. In his conversation and teaching, Jesus reminds the people about the coming of a better bread from heaven. In John 6:32-33, Jesus tells the crowd, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."¹ Jesus is clear that manna is not true bread from God. There is yet another bread from God that is true bread, bread that will give life to the world, not life that comes from the feeding of our physical bodies to meet our daily

nutritional needs, but life that is full, reconciled to God for all time, true life, everlasting life given to us through bread from heaven. Jesus tells the crowd in Chapter 6 starting with verse 47: “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.”ⁱⁱ Jesus then tells the crowd, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”ⁱⁱⁱ When Jesus brings forward items from the Old Testament, we should pay attention. He tells us there was bread from heaven, manna, sent by God, yet those who ate it died. Jesus tells us that he is the true bread that was to come, that something better than manna has come. Jesus is the bread that leads to eternal life and those who believe in him will have eternal life. Jesus makes it clear in his statement to the crowd that he is the true bread of life. He is the only way to eternal life. And Jesus is clear that he will give his flesh for the life of the world. He will suffer, bleed, and die on the cross, the divine in human flesh, that we might be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God by the power of Holy Spirit.

Are we looking to Jesus for our daily bread? Do we have a rhythm of daily living that begins each day with receiving daily bread from God? We receive our daily bread not by going out to look for manna, the food of angels, but by seeking the love of Christ found in a daily meeting with him. Are we starting our days not with grumbling about the challenges in our lives but by showing gratitude for God’s steadfast love? Are we getting up and going out each day to search for our daily bread by opening the word of God and finding the spiritual sustenance we need given to us in God’s word each day? Are we taking time not only to lift up our petitions to Jesus for our needs for a new day but opening ourselves to listening to what he has for us each day? Are we developing rhythms in our lives whereby we are reading God’s word and praying each morning as we start our day? God’s word becomes our daily bread. Bread from heaven comes down and transforms us into Christ’s image. We should be striving to start our day with Jesus, lifting up our love to him and giving thanks for what he has done for us, is doing in us, and will do for us this day. We cannot depend on yesterday’s daily bread or last Sunday’s as it has been consumed and has completed its intended purpose in us.

We need fresh daily bread to sustain us for each new day. Let me encourage you to try to start a daily rhythm of beginning each day with Jesus. As you begin your day, read some of God’s word. Read from the Bible book that we are looking at together each Sunday (Exodus),

then lift up praises to Jesus, thanking him for a new day and renewed mercies for its living. As you begin your day, share with Jesus your concerns and petitions in prayer and listen for his reply. If you don't have such a rhythm in your life, then let me encourage you to try the Seedbed Wake-Up Calls. You will read scripture, pray, learn, and praise God in about twenty minutes of time. We don't have to be like John Wesley, who got up at four a.m. each morning to spend time with Jesus (although that is a great example, and he did go to bed early). Instead, start trying to establish a daily rhythm of spending time with Jesus each morning that you might receive daily bread from God before you head out into the world. Don't seek to ask Jesus to bless your daily plans but seek to spend time with Jesus asking him to have and use you each day.

I learned this week that creative people, of which I am not, shared recipes for manna or honey-tasting bread on the Internet. Kay has graciously prepared some for us to sample, and I would like to invite all of us to come to the altar this morning and receive a piece of bread, give thanks for daily bread, eat it, listen for Jesus, and spend a moment thanking Jesus for the true bread from heaven. Think of yourselves as Israelites who have awakened in the wilderness and are going out to search for the manna God has provided. Come to the altar as you are led by the Spirit and taste manna, letting its taste remind you not only of the bread from heaven that our ancestors received in the wilderness but also the true bread that has come down and made us whole. Come and receive manna and don't grumble, but praise Jesus in gratitude who came as true bread from heaven. Let me pray and I will move to the altar, bless the manna, and then distribute daily bread.

Pray with me: Jesus, we thank you that you came down from heaven and gave your flesh that we might live. Jesus, give us grateful hearts and bring praise to our lips for the true bread given as your flesh for us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Ask the Father for daily bread and when you receive it, go forth into Jesus' mission to all people.

ⁱ John 6:32-33 NRSV Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ John 6:44-46 NRSV Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid