

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 29, 2018

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 • Psalm 78:23-29 • Ephesians 4:1-16 • John 6:24-35

We're taking a little break from the gospel of Mark right now. And we're taking a little summer road trip through the gospel of John. And we'll be in John until the end of August unless Carol Brighton takes a detour when she preaches in a couple of weeks. But when you put Mark and John's gospels next to each other, you realize that they make a very odd pair. They're both telling us about Jesus, but the Jesus they talk about seems very different. Let's consider, for a second, the way they treat miracles.

A typical miracle in Mark would go something like this. "And immediately Jesus lifted her up by the hand and she was healed and immediately he told no one to tell anyone what they had seen." For Mark, Jesus's miracles are the kingdom of God breaking into the world. So they don't need to be explained. They need to be seen. They need to be witnessed.

Not so for John. No, John's Jesus doesn't perform miracles. He performs signs. And the important thing about signs is that they tell you about something else. So unlike Mark where Jesus performs a miracle and then rushes on to the next thing, John's Jesus tells them to unpack it. Have a conversation about it. What do you think the sign means? What does it communicate? What does the sign tell you about who "I am?"

We heard about one of those signs last week, the feeding of the five thousand. In today's gospel, that same crowd shows up again looking for more bread. And instead of just giving them more of what they want, Jesus invites them into a conversation about what the bread means. What does the bread tell you about who Jesus is? And because these are first-century Jews, they take a story from the scriptures and try to understand Jesus in terms of that story. And the story they choose is God giving manna to the Israelites. So what can that story from the book of Exodus tell us about who Jesus is?

Things fall apart pretty quickly in the book of Exodus. In Chapter 14, God leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom. In Chapter 15, the Israelites sing songs to thank and praise God for their liberation. And in Chapter 16, which we heard from today, the people start complaining. "If only we had died... in the land of Egypt," they dramatically cry, "when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread."

Now, is that true? Was Egypt actually that nice? No. Not even close. The author of Exodus says that the Egyptians were "ruthless" and "made [the Israelites'] lives bitter with hard service and mortar and brick and every kind of field labor." But the Israelites' hunger has made them forget about all that. They're so hungry they start to get nostalgic for Egypt.

But God hears their dramatic complaints and takes them seriously, and so God tells Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you." And this bread, which is not really bread as much as this white flaky stuff, is called manna. God doesn't want the people to be suffering on the way to the promised land or, even worse, getting nostalgic for the times they were in bondage, so the manna is God's way of providing for these people in the wilderness. But the manna is a very strange grace to receive. And it provides an unusual kind of abundance.

Because the manna doesn't really taste like anything. If you're nostalgic for the glory days of the fleshpots of Egypt, the manna isn't going to do much for you. And it doesn't

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ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

look like anything either. The word “manna” comes straight from the Hebrew, and it just means, “What is it?” As if the first Israelite to find some held it up against the sun before turning back to her friends and asking, “What is it?” And the name stuck. So as the Israelites are going through the wilderness, they are being fed by this manna. And they are also being fed by that same question: “What is it?”

Most of us find ourselves asking some version of that question every day. For some of us, it’s a personal question about our vocations or our relationships. “What is it that I am called to do in this situation?” “What is it that God is doing with my life here?” For some of us, it’s a question about the mission of the church. “What is it that we are called to proclaim in our communities? What is it that our neighbors need us to be?” And there’s always a temptation to try to wrap those questions up and get them done with to move on to more important things. But asking those questions means that we’re still in this back and forth with God. Having a holy conversation about our identity and who it is that God has created us to be. That’s the question that nourishes us along the way because it’s the one that reminds us that God is on the way with us.

The other trick about manna is that you can only get enough for one day. Which means that you have to get up every morning and go get the What Is It? off of the ground. If God is a God of abundance, if Jesus is feeding the five thousand with leftovers, then why does the manna dry up after one day? Why is God being so stingy with it?

We get a hint at the very beginning of Exodus. We’re told that when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they were tasked with constructing these massive infrastructure projects called “supply cities.” And Pharaoh wanted these supply cities built because they made him feel safe. One of the big worries in the back of the people’s minds in the Hebrew Bible is famine. It’s this little fear in the back of your mind that you won’t have enough when things go downhill. But when you had a supply city, like Pharaoh, you never had to worry about running out of anything. You always had plenty of food or weapons or bricks or whatever you needed.

Store up enough, we think to ourselves, and you won’t have to worry about the future. And it’s true. If you store up enough, you won’t have to worry about the future. But something else will happen. You’ll stop paying attention to the present, too. You’ll stop asking, “What is it? What is it that God is doing among us? What is it that God is doing in our community?” Stop asking those questions and you’ll miss the hidden graces that flow into our lives. Because God’s abundance of small mercies is always found in the present.

I had a conversation last winter with a pastor whose church has a very sizeable endowment. And every year they take whatever the endowment made and that’s the operating budget for the next year. And I remarked that must give them some peace of mind. And she replied, “If it were up to me, I would take the endowment, I would put it on the front lawn of the church, and I would burn it.” Now, she has a flair for the dramatic like those hungry Israelites, but there was something very profound in what she said. That security should have freed them up to be more creative in their ministries, bolder in their proclamation, and caring in their life together, but she said it had the exact opposite effect. Because they felt secure, they got complacent. Because they didn’t have to worry about the future, they let themselves stop caring about the present. They stopped asking what the

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

needs of their community were, they stopped asking who God was calling them to be, and they stopped asking the question that's the heartbeat of our life with God: "What is it?"

Most of us don't have golden calves tucked away in our closets. That's a little too tacky. But we have a storehouse full of what we need out back. For some of us, that storehouse is filled with money. For others of us, it's full of ideas we have about ourselves. Or it's full of our health. Or it's full of relationships. And as long as I can keep that storehouse full, I won't have to worry if a famine hits. And as long as we keep it full of whatever it is that we're hoarding, we think we can protect ourselves from the dangers of the wilderness. And what happens? We end up becoming captive to our desire for autonomy and independence.

God isn't testing these Israelites so much as teaching them. Teaching them what it means to live in this new way, living in relationship with God instead of living under Pharaoh. It's a new way of living that's counterintuitive to most of us. Because it means that we can only be truly free when we realize our dependence on God. And that's a very difficult thing to learn. And it's a new way of living they had to relearn every day. It took some of the Israelites forty years to learn it. It's a way of living that requires the confidence to trust in God's future. And that's the confidence God gives us every time we gather around this table.

It's interesting how every congregation comes to this table differently. Some have an altar rail, some don't. Some have the altar high up, some have the altar down low. Some use wafers, others bread. Some common cup, others little glasses. We like to make those differences more important than they really are. Because the really important thing is that we all come to the table the same way: empty handed.

Empty handed like those Israelites went into the wilderness every morning and empty handed like that crowd that asked Jesus for more bread. Empty handed but full of faith. Ready to receive the one who calls himself the bread of life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor