

**18 Pentecost-B**

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

So I want to read you verses 17-23, the verses omitted from our reading from Numbers this morning. Here's a reminder of the context of the story from Numbers: the Israelites are tired, grumpy, hungry and sick of the manna they've been given. They're nostalgic about the cucumbers and the leeks and the melon and the garlic they used to eat "for nothing," as they put it. (And truthfully, I'm wondering if Moses was thinking, himself feeling grumpy, "what do you mean, 'for nothing'? You were slaves! You paid for that so-called free food with your skin and with your liberty!" I gotta say, that's what I would have been thinking, if I had been their fearless leader.)

But the people just keep complaining. And finally they say, "Now there is nothing at all but this manna to look at. If only we had meat to eat!" they say.

And so the Lord says this to Moses—these are the missing verses from our reading today:

Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel; bring them to the tent of meeting." I will come down and talk with you there; <sup>18</sup>And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. <sup>19</sup>You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, <sup>20</sup>but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the LORD who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

Why did we ever leave Egypt?

There are two answers to that question, aren't there? The first answer is the one we teach our children and our children's children. The first answer is that God provided the means for the children of Israel to be led out of slavery and into the promised land. Moses teaches the people in Exodus: *You shall tell your child on that day, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt." It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on your lips;*

And I think most of us know the famous, fundamental prayer of Judaism from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy that both Jews and Christians know as the Shema:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

The Shema, the “Hear, O Israel” prayer reminds us that God’s chosen have been called out to new ventures; they have been called out of bondage and into freedom; they have been provided with a covenantal promise, with a place to call home, with an identity. Of course, no one has ever been really clear on what that means.

And then again, the question “Why did we ever leave Egypt?” also has a second, less glorious answer, one that isn’t as much about God’s providence but simply this: We didn’t want to be slaves anymore. Anything, *anything* would have been better than that. We wanted freedom more than bondage—or so we thought.

Because at this point in the journey, the manna isn’t looking good. And slavery in Egypt isn’t seeming so bad. There were all those free cucumbers. All those free melons. And free cloves of garlic and bunches of leeks.

So the Lord’s none too happy with the people and their grumbling for meat, for the way things used to be. As promised—or as threatened--the Lord does indeed send meat. The Lord sends such a profusion of quail that many people gorge themselves on it, sicken and then die.

I’ll be honest with you, this journey story from Numbers is an ominous one. It’s full of crotchety people with Moses as their crotchety leader and a Lord God who seems crotchety, as well, providing plentiful food, but of questionable nourishment. We can’t call any of these people happy campers, can we?

So--why did we ever leave Egypt?

Wasn’t our slavery better than this?

Or—let me put it this way: Why did we ever leave Eden?

Eden was a good place, right? The food was even better there than in Egypt. Everything was ours for the taking: low-hanging lemons, fragrant grapes, ripe figs; it was a plant-based dieter’s paradise, a vegan’s nirvana—all except for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But it was that fruit we couldn’t resist, that fruit we couldn’t stop ourselves from reaching for—that fruit with its sweet aroma and velvet texture too perfect not to want to possess, not to want to ingest.

Still, we left Eden. We had to. And we left Egypt. Because God called us to. And so we had to. We abandoned those places. And ever since leaving Eden, ever since leaving Egypt, we’ve had to trust that God has abandoned them, too. We have had to trust that God has left both of those places behind and we have had to

trust that God has come along with us on our long, often aimless, often confusing journey.

That's the story of salvation history in the Bible.

But it's the story of God's salvation history in our lives, as well. Sometimes on our lives' journeys we are given manna. Sometimes we are given quail. Sometimes on that journey we want to turn back because we long for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Or maybe we're just longing for the figs or the cucumbers or the sparkling lemons.

Or maybe we're just *longing*. You know that feeling?

Frankly, I believe that God made us as creatures who long. Our longing doesn't always make perfect sense. But we understand what it feels like. Remember that joke from Woody Allen's movie, "Annie Hall?" He sets it up this way: There are two women at a Catskill mountain resort. And one of them says, "Wow, the food at this place is really terrible."

And the other woman says, "Yeah, I know! And such small portions!"

I don't know if you can relate to that and I hope you won't think ill of me if I admit that I can. But I can. I am not always the best at counting my many blessings and naming them one by one. And sometimes, if I do manage to count my blessings, I find myself longing for a little more, for a little more blessing.

Are you like that, too? Or are you perfect? Are you always grateful for everything? I mean, one of my favorite passages in the entire Greek and Hebrew scriptures is from Paul's greeting to the people of Philippi. He writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayer for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

I love this passage so much because I want it to be true for me; I want it to be my experience. I want to be the person who "thanks my God every time I remember you." I want to be the person who is "constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." I want to be the person who is "confident...that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

And I try to do that. Or I sort of try. Sometimes. Okay, a lot of the time. But you know what? I'm not that person. I'm not that good. I'm not St. Paul. I'm not a perfect disciple. As I told you already, I'm not even somebody who counts her many blessings without getting greedy. I'm like one of those grouching Israelite:

Why did we ever leave Egypt?

Why did we ever leave Eden?

If only we had meat to eat?

But—but it's right at that point that I find myself being tickled by--actually enjoying--the Lord's response to the grumbling Israelites—*You want meat? I'll give you meat—quail till it comes out of your nostrils!*

It's as if the Lord is saying "be careful what you wish for." It's as if the Lord is saying, "You *can* have too much of a good thing."

And then those words, in Numbers, about the nostril-clogging quail directs me back to Jesus' cryptic words in Mark: 'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Our Lutheran study Bible—a great resource and I do hope you have one—says of these verses, "Their meaning is unclear, but the point seems to be about purification and commitment to the purpose of God's kingdom."

But we know a thing or two about salt, right? We know that it serves many purposes. Sometimes we salt things to preserve them. Other times to season them, to bring out a better flavor. Other times we do well *not* to salt things—because salt can be unhealthy. It can wreck our blood pressure, eat our cars, wreak havoc on roadways. On a spiritual level, salt can season us as Christians or it can dessicate our souls.

So what does Jesus mean to be saying with these words? To be honest with you, I think it's helpful that the meaning of these lines is not crystal clear. Because I find that things that appear crystal clear tend to limit our imagination and restrict the breadth of our thought. When we can ask, as Luther has surely taught us, in the Small Catechism, to ask, "What does this mean?" then we begin to unlock some wisdom and some insight into how we can best, or at least better, embody God's love in our lives.

As joint congregations seeking a shared, potential future together, St. John's and First Lutheran Churches are in a "What does this mean?" moment and I feel honored, challenged and blessed that I'm part of this moment and that Pastor Allie and I can share together in this process with you. But I would raise this question as well: the church is bigger than our two congregations, combined or separate. We are part of a faith tradition that is exponentially longer than the histories of both of our congregations combined. We are called to think about much, much more than what happens to First and to St. John's in whatever re-configured model of ministry vote to pursue.

In truth, we are called to worry less about the cucumbers and the garlic and the melons and meat. Rather, we are called to be salt and light and leaven, letting the love of Christ season, flavor and save our world. We truly are called as one in mission, our varied gifts united by Christ the Lord of all.

God has taken us from Eden and taken us from Egypt and never, not even once, left us. Our God, our Emmanuel, goes with us. Thus we are bold to go forth in hope, in truth and in faith.

Thanks be to God! Amen.