

August 1, 2021

Pentecost 10

Exodus 16:2-15

John 6:24-35

This morning, as we drop in on the people of Israel, we find them in liminal space. There's your Word of the Day. Liminal. It comes from the Latin "limina" and literally means "threshold." The divide between the interior and the exterior, between one room and the next, between one time and the next. In the spiritual life, liminal space describes a place of unknowing, a place of transition and change, a place where, perhaps, the old is passing away but the new has not yet been born. It can be a time of anxiety and fear. But if we allow ourselves to sit at the edge of the unknown with curiosity and wonder about what's unfolding, it can be a time of creativity and growth.

Liminal space.

Recall that Israel has been freed from 400 years of captivity in Egypt. They had been serving their Egyptian masters, building pyramids under increasingly onerous conditions. Now, at last, God through Moses and Aaron, has delivered Israel out of captivity across the Red Sea and on toward the Land of Canaan, the Land of Promise, the Land of Milk and Honey, a land the people can call their own. But first they have some traveling to do. Across the Sinai Desert, into the wilderness, a place where they will wander for 40 years. Forty years! It's a liminal space. A time and a place where they will come to know their God intimately, the one who says to Moses, "I Am who I Am." "Yahweh" is how it's said in Hebrew. Yahweh will travel with them, riding along in the Ark of the Covenant, occasionally covering them with a mighty cloud, the "shekinah" of holiness, it's called in Hebrew. Yahweh is as close as close can be.

Yet, human nature being what it is, the people aren't satisfied. They begin to compare their current circumstances to a misremembered, mythologized past in Egypt. You know, the "good ole days", where they sat by their fleshpots and had their fill of bread. You remember those good ole days, don't you? The good ole days of the '50s or the '60s or the '70s or whenever your version of the good ole days might be. For some of us, the good ole days might be 2019! It's too often the case that the good ole days are any days that aren't the present days, if you see what I mean. The irony of course for Israel is that their misremembered good old days in Egypt didn't include fleshpots and eating their fill of bread. The reality of those days was forced labor and starvation. They prayed night and day to God for deliverance. And when God answers these prayers and brings them out of captivity in Egypt and into the wilderness and on towards The Promised land, what do they do? They grumble, they complain, they want to go back to slavery. In other words, they want to leave the unknown and return to the known. Even though the "known" was a place of suffering.

It's so deeply human, to prefer the known to the unknown, no doubt about it – liminal space can be hard. So what does Yahweh do? Their complaints have been heard! Bread will rain from heaven! But here's the catch. It's a test. They are to go out each morning and just gather enough bread – manna, it's called – just enough bread for the day. You know, their daily bread. Yahweh is as good as

his word and the next morning, the ground is covered with a frost-like substance. Manna. And as the story goes on to tell us, it's sweet. The people gather it and are satisfied. It's a sign of the generosity of God. A sign of God's abundant care for God's people.

Now remember, this is a test! So people being people, some don't trust God's generosity. They have to take matters into their own hands. They begin to hoard the manna – store it away for that time when they imagine God will forget about them. And what happens? The manna spoils. It becomes sour. They couldn't trust God to provide their *daily* bread. Liminal space is hard. Trust is hard. But trust is necessary. Trust, it turns out, is life giving.

John, the Gospel writer, clearly has this story of God's generosity and God's closeness alongside the human need to be in control in mind, as he tells the story of Jesus feeding the Five Thousand and the events that follow that we read about today. You remember last Sunday. A little boy offers all that he has, five barley loaves and two fish, and that becomes a meal that Jesus himself feeds to five thousand hungry people. Real, physical hunger is satisfied. The people want more, of course, and so they chase after Jesus, wanting to make him their king. They want to make him be what they want him to be.

This morning, we meet them when they've finally caught up with him. They want more miracles – more signs – and remind him that God had given their ancestors bread in the wilderness to eat. Jesus tells them that while it was Moses who gave their ancestors bread to eat, it was God who gave them the true bread, bread from Heaven – bread that gives life to the world. "Give us some of this bread," they say. "I am the bread of life," he replies. NOT, "I'll give you the bread of life." NOT, "I'll tell you where to find the bread of life." I AM the bread of life. "I AM who I AM," says Yahweh. "I AM the bread of life," says Jesus. Do you see how this closeness, this intimacy, this personalization, this incarnation of the Divine Energy, of the Divine Source of Life, gives the people all they need? They don't need a king. They need the Cereal of Life. And it's this Bread that gives eternal life. Jesus calls this deep nourishment "the food that endures for eternal life." Jesus does not say, "the food that gives you life after death." Afterlife is not his subject; for him, "eternal life" is a mode of intimate, mutual indwelling with God that can begin here and now, well before death. Precisely as intimacy with God, it cannot be limited by death – but the key point is not that "eternal life" is a longer life, but rather that it's a life with and in God. In other words, as Jesus presents it in John, "eternal life" is a matter of quality of life, not "quantity" of life. After all, "eternal" doesn't mean "lasting a very, very, very long time" – since even the longest time is still temporal – indeed, it's all the more temporal the longer it lasts! "Eternal life" means a life of intimacy with God that transcends time altogether, in that sense a "timeless" life of beauty and grace.

So here we are this morning. Dare I say it, we are living in liminal space. It's an in-between time. As much as we had hoped, the pandemic's end doesn't appear to be in sight yet now that the Delta Variant seems to be exploding. And of course, St. Thomas itself is in transition. The retirement of the incumbent Lector – that would be me – means there's a leadership transition on the very near horizon. Which means a time of unknowing. Which means some wilderness time. Will there be some anxiety during this transition time, this time in liminal space? Sure there will be. It's perfectly normal and please, please remember that. Anxiety during times of change and transition is perfectly normal. And when anxiety arises in healthy bodies – in healthy communities like St. Thomas – the thing to do is to speak it – name it – put it out there so the community can hold it together as a community - *support* one another, *listen* to one another, *hold* one another, *love* one another. And like the people of Israel in the wilderness, who were led by Moses and Aaron, St. Thomas is blessed with wise and faithful leaders. We

have a vestry made up of accomplished professionals, folks who have served St. Thomas faithfully, folks who have a vision for the thriving future that God has in mind from this place. And you're led by a skilled and dedicated staff. In fact, I'll say it's the most highly skilled, faithful, dedicated church staff I've ever seen. Father Steve, Greg, Sunni, Ashley, Doug, Natalie, Lisalynn, Jacki, Kevin and Vel. These faithful servants bring a degree of professionalism and dedication to ministry that is remarkable. Each of these good people could be earning far more in other lines of work, but they choose to be here. Why? Because they love the Lord Jesus Christ, they love St. Thomas, and they love *you*.

And then there's you. Each one of you. Doers. Seekers. The faithful. Serving Christ and serving Christ's people. St. Thomas will continue to thrive with your leadership. Of course, like the people in the wilderness, who had Yahweh traveling with them, covering them with the cloud of holiness, offering them bread for the journey, you will be traveling through this liminal time in this liminal space. But you'll be accompanied by the Bread of Life. This life is the life we're made for. This is the true bread that we hunger and thirst for, and so we come together here in this community in faith. Faith that we are loved and cared for and held. Our response in faith is gratitude and giving with generous hearts just as we have been given to so generously.

Yes, God gives us our daily bread. And God also gives us the Bread of Heaven. "Give us this bread always," we say. And we hear Jesus say, "I am that bread. Come to me. Trust me. Be fed. Thrive. Here is the bread that gives life to the world."