

Numbers 11:4-35 (NRSV)

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! [5] We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; [6] but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

[7] Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. [8] The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. [9] When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

[10] Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. [11] So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? [12] Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? [13] Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' [14] I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. [15] If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once--if I have found favor in your sight--and do not let me see my misery."

[16] So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. [17] I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. [18] 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. [19] You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, [20] 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?' " [21] But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month!' [22] Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" [23] The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

[24] So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent.

[25] Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

[26] Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. [27] And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." [28] And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" [29] But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" [30] And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

[31] Then a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. [32] So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. [33] But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. [34] So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. [35] From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazereth.

THE POWER OF COMPLAINTS

Several years ago I was elected president of my subdivision's homeowner's association. Never in my life have I heard more complaints. I tried to resolve those problems to the best of my ability, but, I found that some people made it personal.

They not only complained about what was going on in our subdivision. They also complained about my leadership.

One night we had a meeting and this one guy kept badgering me about what was wrong with our community and our board of directors. Finally, he publicly besmirched my character, and I had had enough.

I said that as far as I was concerned the meeting was over. I was not about to stay there and listen to his baseless claims any more.

And I walked out of the meeting. It was not my finest hour. Usually I don't let people get to me in that way.

When the elections were held the next year I made sure that my name did not appear on the ballot! That was a good job to leave.

And so when I read our Scripture lesson for today about Moses and the criticism he received from his people, I could readily identify with his frustration.

COMPLAINING ABOUT THE FOOD

Moses had even more reason to be frustrated. He was called by God to lead his people out of slavery into the Promised Land. And it happened. The mightiest nation on the face of the earth was forced to allow God's people to leave the land where they were enslaved.

And how did the people respond to their miraculous deliverance? They complained about the food!

As most of you know the Israelites existed in the wilderness on manna. This was the "bread of heaven" provided by God.

In today's lesson we learn a little bit more about that food. It was like a sticky seed that they ground into a kind of paste. This was then boiled, and they had something to eat that tasted like "cakes baked in oil." (Maybe we could think of it as the first bagel!)

Some commentators suggest that it may have been the residue of a certain plant that is still eaten by the Bedouin and is referred to as “mann.” Thus we have the Hebrew term “manna.”

Regardless of how the Israelites got the food, one thing is clear. This nutritious meal was provided for them by God. And when the people rejected the manna, they were rejecting the provision of God. What they had was not good enough. Manna didn't whet their appetite any more. It was too boring.

They craved something else. They craved meat. Actually, the Scripture tells us they had a “strong craving.” And it must have been a very strong craving. The “rabble,” the faithless ones who first brought up this complaint actually wept because they wanted meat so badly.

Can you imagine wanting something so badly you actually weep for it?

And their dissatisfaction soon infected the whole camp of the Israelites. The Bible tells us that all of the Israelites wept because they did not have any meat to eat. They stood at the door of their tent and complained with tears in their eyes.

They said,

“Back in Egypt we didn't have to work so hard for food. We had fish every day and melons and cucumbers and onions and garlic.”

The more they thought about those delicious meals in Egypt, the louder they whined.

They were slaves in Egypt, but at least they had three squares a day. And they began to despise the food that the Lord had given them. They said,

“Nothing tastes good in this god forsaken place.
All we get is manna, manna, and more manna.”

LEARNING TO LOVE MANNA

Freedom always comes at a price. And in this case the price was being willing to live in the wilderness; freedom came at the price of not knowing

where the next meal was coming from. They had to leave the certainty of slavery in order to receive God's blessing on an uncertain journey. They had to be willing to move in response to God's call.

The complaint of God's people was about more than a lack of tasty food. It was about their craving for something other than the life that God had given them. They were dissatisfied with their life.

With the blessing of God, the manna from heaven right in front of them, they longed for the "good old days" in Egypt. This was not the first time nor would it be the last that they would long to go back to the slavery of Egypt.

In the New Testament book of Acts (7:39), Stephen described the Israelites as a people who were always reluctant to hear God's word and trust his provision. Stephen said that "in their hearts" they were always wanting to turn back again to Egypt. The certainty and security of slavery seemed preferable to the uncertainty of God's future promise.

Of course they proved Stephen's point by killing him for delivering God's unpopular message! It had been a long time since the people left Egypt, but they still turned their hearts in that direction.

We too often turn our hearts toward Egypt. We long for the good old days when we still had our strength or our beauty or our hair. We have cravings. Our lives are filled with desires for all sorts of things. Instead of enjoying the blessings of God that are ours now we become dissatisfied with our life.

Our hearts turn away from the manna, the common blessings that God gives us every day. And we turn toward the life that we do not have. We turn toward the slavery that comes when we are caught up in the cycle of always craving just a little bit more.

The meals weren't really free in Egypt. They were some of the costliest meals the Israelites would ever eat. And our lives won't be any better if we get the desires of our heart either. We have a hunger that even the blue plate special won't fill.

Nothing but the bread of heaven will satisfy the longing that we feel. The love of God as revealed in Jesus is the only answer for what ails us. But, we must first develop an appetite for nutritious food.

FRUSTRATED LEADERS

Moses is frustrated with the whining and complaints of the people of Israel. And in his frustration, he too begins to forget the blessings of God. As the people whine about the food, Moses complains about God's lack of help and support. As the people do not appreciate or trust the provision of God, so Moses does not appreciate or trust God's leading.

Moses feels all alone in his leadership role.

And so Moses tells God that these whining children are somebody else's problem. Moses said, "I didn't sign up to be somebody's mama. These are your kids Lord, and I am tired of being the baby sitter. It's your turn to care for them."

Moses, like many of us failed to turn his burden over to the Lord ... until that burden got the better of him. And at that point he blamed his own lack of trust upon the Lord. Moses thought that the Lord had done this to him. The Lord had placed him in this position of leadership, and it was an impossible job.

I've listened to many frustrated ministers who sound a lot like Moses. They are discouraged by the lack of faith in their congregation, but they are also frustrated and discouraged with their own lack of success. The complaints of the congregation serve to highlight their own inadequacy.

So what do they do? Quite often they quit in frustration. Like Moses they say,
"Lord, these people are messed up, and I'm messed up because of them. I've got to do something else for a living."

Actually, Moses' reaction was even more extreme. He not only blamed God for the trouble he was experiencing, he also became significantly depressed. He didn't want to go on living.

Moses said, “I have an impossible job. I cannot provide meat for all these people. Lord, if you love me, kill me now and get it over with. Why are you torturing me?”

Moses has a short memory, doesn't he? Moses was the one who saw the burning bush and heard the call of God. Moses was the one who courageously faced down Pharaoh and led the people through the Red Sea. Moses had seen miracle after miracle.

Why was he so faithless in this situation?

AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE

Moses was like many Christian leaders that I know. He invents his own problems and then proceeds to treat God as the source of those problems. Moses had never been called by God to provide the people with meat. And Moses was not the only one with the burden of leadership. The Bible tells us that significant administrative responsibilities had already been given to others on the advice of his father in law, Jethro. (Exodus 18:13-26)

But, Moses was a micromanager and a people pleaser. He took too much responsibility upon himself. He thought that it was all up to him to get the job done, that God “had no hands but his hands.” And he about drove himself crazy!

Don't we often do the same thing in the church? We listen to the complaints of the people, and base the ministry of the church upon the complaints. Now in some cases that's a good thing. There are legitimate needs and complaints that we should address.

But, sometimes complaints are not a sign of need but a sign of faithlessness. Sometimes leaders are called not to comfort the afflicted but afflict the comfortable! Sometimes instead of trying to give the people what they want, we are called to give the people what they don't want!

This was what God was calling Moses to do. Yes, God's Spirit would come upon the elders as a sign of God's continuing presence and as a reminder to

Moses that he did not carry the burden of leadership alone. And God would give the people the meat that they craved.

But, when the people got their heart's desire it would not be a blessing. It would be a judgment. God said,

“You want meat? I'll give you meat, more meat than you've ever seen before. I'll give you meat to last not one day or five days or even twenty days. I'll give you meat for a whole month. I'm going to give you so much meat that you'll be sick of it.”

Sometimes I think the worst judgment God could bring upon us is to give us exactly what we want.

I'm fascinated by the stories of those who win the lottery. Their dreams come true, but in some cases they find that the extra money is not a blessing but a curse. Everyone wants some of the winnings.

Family and friends become estranged. And in the end some of the winners say, “This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me!”

IMPOSSIBLE!

Notice that Moses still doesn't understand what God is saying. Moses is still filtering God's message through his own compulsive need to do everything and please everyone, and so Moses now thinks that God is requiring him to provide meat for the Israelites to eat for a whole month.

Immediately Moses begins to calculate how they can do this, and the numbers don't add up. Moses said, “Even if we killed our flocks and herds and took all the fish in the sea, there still wouldn't be enough meat for us. We have over 600,000 people wandering around in the wilderness. It's impossible!”

And God said, “That's where you're wrong Moses. It doesn't depend upon you. It depends upon me. And my power is not limited in any way.”

This story reminds me of what the angel said to Mary when she was told that she would conceive and bear a Son who would be God's Son. She said, "It's impossible." And the angel replied, "With God nothing is impossible."

And the word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

This story also reminds me of those times in the wilderness when thousands are gathered to hear Jesus speak and it gets to be meal time. Jesus tells his disciples to give the crowd something to eat and the disciples protest. They say, "Where in the wilderness can we find enough bread to feed this crowd?" All they have is five loaves and two small fish.

Jesus says,

"Bring it to me."

And he blesses the bread and distributes it and it's enough, more than enough.

With God nothing is impossible.

And only God can provide what we really need.

THE FREE SPIRIT

Moses finally got the message. He trusted in God's power and did what God told him to do. He gathered seventy elders, and the Spirit of God descended not only upon Moses but also upon the elders who were gathered with him. They prophesied in a way that had not been seen before or since.

But, as it always happens when God's Spirit is involved, there was a surprise.

Two of the elders didn't make it to the designated spot for the spiritual retreat, the tent where Moses always met God. Instead, these elders, Medad and Eldad received the Spirit in the camp and prophesied there.

We all know that religious leaders can get awfully upset about unauthorized preaching and so Joshua, Moses' second in command sounds the alarm. He runs to Moses and says, "My Lord Moses stop them!"

But, then we see that Moses finally has gotten the message. It's not about him and what he can do. It's about God and what God chooses to do through his people. The Spirit was not the private possession of Moses or Joshua or

the seventy or even the people of Israel. God in his sovereignty would work when and where he chose.

And for the first time in a long time Moses begin to embrace and accept that. Moses said to Joshua, “It’s not about me. It’s about God and his power to save. I pray that God will put his Spirit on all his people one day.”

With part one of God’s promises fulfilled, Moses and the elders returned to camp. And then part two was fulfilled.

MEAT AND JUDGMENT

Outside the camp quail blew in from the sea. And the Israelites were able to capture them. Their desire for meat had been answered. In fact the Bible tells us that everyone was able to gather at least 60 bushels of quail.

Now quail is good eating, but 60 bushels is a bit much for even the most ardent meat eater. And so the people overdosed on quail. And it wasn’t good for them. Some of them got sick and died.

The Bible tells us that while the meat was still between their teeth they were struck with a plague. Maybe the plague came with the easy to capture birds. At any rate, the real cause of their death was their uncontrolled craving for something other than what God had provided.

And so after burying their fallen comrades they had to leave that place in the wilderness. The Bible tells us they gave it a name, Kibroth Hattaavah. The name means “graves of craving”. It was a place that reminded them that judgment and destruction begins with an unbridled appetite.

The apostle Paul would later talk about those who were bound for destruction.

He wrote in his letter to the Philippians (3:18-19) (NRSV)

“For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. [19] Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

We serve a Savior who died that we might be saved. And so the cross stands at the center of our faith and what we are called to do and be. But, if we live for our cravings instead of our Lord, we will reject the cross in favor of what we might desperately want at the moment.

Ironically, it is the cross that represents salvation, and it is the desires of our heart that represent destruction.

DYING WITH OUR DESIRES

We see people dying all around us every day. They are dying because they substitute their own cravings in place of the provision of God.

We see it in the rich and powerful who crave money and prove over and over again that the “love of money is the root of all evil.” 1Timothy 6:10

We see it in people who try to deaden the pain in life by eating too much or drinking too much. We see it in the people who try to (as the country and western song puts it) look for love in all the wrong places and look for love in too many faces.

We all have our weak points. We all have those things that we crave. We all wish in one way or another ... at least from time to time ... that God would give us something different from what is ours right now. And what we wish for is often so trivial and temporary and destructive.

Our desires lead not to life but death.

What we crave can lead to a grave.

Like Moses and the children of Israel, we have very short memories. We forget what salvation is really all about. We no longer remember the times of deliverance, and we sometimes even want to return to past slaveries.

But, fortunately for us God in Christ has given us the perfect pneumatic device. Every time we take the bread and drink the cup we are reminded that the manna from heaven, the bread of life has been with us from the beginning and will be with us till the end of time. We may be unfaithful to Jesus, but Jesus is never unfaithful to us.

Through it all he still offers us the bread and the wine. He still tells us even on the night that we betray him, “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

Jesus once told his disciples,

I am the bread of life. [49] Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. [50] This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. John 6:48-50 (NRSV)

Come home my friends.

Take and eat for this is the provision of God.

It is the bread that brings us eternal life.

Let us trust in Him alone.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN