

## Lent 4

March 11, 2018

As I studied and thought about the lessons for this week, the theme struck me as somewhat ironic. It's about food, especially bread, the bread in the wilderness and the bread that comes down from Heaven. Traditionally during Lent we fast, that is, go without food or certain kinds of food. That's what Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras is all about! Getting our fill of the foods we are going to live without. It was, of course, in earlier times a season of scarcity. People were encouraged to reflect on things other than their own physical comfort.

As one teacher has said, "Perhaps the call of Lent is to live simply". The lessons have helped my perspective a bit. So, what food are they talking about and what do they teach us about ourselves and the nature of God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the Israelites were in the Wilderness after being miraculously delivered by God from slavery in Egypt. They were so grateful – not! They pretty much complained the whole time, remembering the flesh pots and full belly bread, cucumbers, melons, etc. Looking back it was better before. So "the people became impatient on the way". They "spoke out against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food(manna)". This is not the first or even the second time they have expressed these sentiments

The people have just expressed two diametrically opposed thoughts.

1. There is no food and no water. Never mind the quails in the evening, the water and the manna gathered in the morning.
2. We detest this miserable food – it's boring! I would like to say a short word about manna: it means, "What is it?" According to Exodus 16 it was, "like coriander seed, white and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." (I always think of mouse-sized communion wafers). They were to gather it in the morning, make it in to cakes, bake or boil it. They were only to gather

enough for their family to use in one day. They weren't to hoard it or it would become wormy.

The Israelites were out of their comfort zone. They had to depend on God to provide for them and were fearful that God wouldn't be there. Apparently they didn't remember that they were SLAVES in Egypt. I wonder if they were able to enjoy all that fine food while making bricks without straw.

So...what is God's response in this story? God responds like the chef in a 4-star restaurant who has heard the customers complaining about the food. He comes out raging and brandishing his carving knife. In this case it was poisonous serpents. The people get bit, people die, and Moses intervenes. God provides healing in the form of a bronze serpent. All the people had to do was to look on it and be healed. We will hear about this particular image later.

We may think of the Israelites as foolish as characterized in verse 17 of today's psalm, but how different are we? The psalm is all about being thankful. Some times that is harder than at others.

Here is my own personal experience with the wilderness.

At one point in my life everything was coming undone. My marriage of 23 years was ending, even though I was certain God had brought us together. My children were falling apart in various ways. We lost our house and our equipment, due to an unscrupulous business partner. Then I lost my job at the fabric store, which had given me a great deal of pleasure and was a creative outlet. This was truly the wilderness for me. I didn't understand and I was not thankful.

Here's my experience of God in my wilderness: It came through people in this community and their prayers and a program called "A Short Course in Practical Wisdom" offered here, I was able to find my way again. I began to learn more about myself in relation to God through study, prayer and meditation. I could again see God working in my life and my perspective changed.

I got a new job at the Health Department. It was at the time of the AIDS crisis and I met people living under a sentence of death. They were often rejected by their families, faith communities and the rest of society. Some were even afraid to come in our door or leave their name for our AIDS coordinator to call them back. Many had a faith much deeper than mine – I was truly humbled. The only thing I was able to give them was understanding and love.

At this time Fr. Bill Burnett put my name up for inclusion in the Diocesan HIV/AIDS committee, on which I served until it was incorporated into a larger group. I was able to use my perspective and skills to help create a Diocesan wide handbook of services for people living with HIV/AIDS. Until this time the only literature available was for the large urban areas.

I was able to use my creative skills to make several banners for the group and to facilitate the Whidbey Island AIDS quilt. This led indirectly to my business creating vestments and paraments.

In my job I have the opportunity to work in the WIC program, which is a nutrition education and food program. I meet pregnant women, mothers and fathers of young children and the children themselves. Seeing these young families struggle to keep going, to remain in their homes, and have enough food for their families has changed my perspective about “the least of these”. I feel so fortunate to be able to help in just a small way. They are often invisible to the larger society and have much to teach us about love and compassion.

Another perspective on wilderness shows up in the Epistle in one word: Sin. As a cradle Episcopalian I often stumble over the word sin. However, stumbling around in the dark, our choices are so often less than what we are and can be. Each week in the confession we acknowledge that we are made in God’s image and likeness, but that we fail to honor it. We are sometimes destructive; we don’t bring wholeness and love to those around us and to the world in which we live. The description in the BCP on pg. 848 reads: Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God and other people and all Creation. According to Genesis 1:26-27 we are made in the image and likeness

of God. But as in the letter to the Ephesians today we do often seem to be following a different path. However the passage talks about God's mercy, great love and kindness. We have been raised up and seated with him in heavenly places. It is through God that we can do good works and truly be God's work of art.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and teacher at the Center for Contemplation and Action in New Mexico, is doing a year-long, on-line teaching on Image and Likeness. He defines Image as objective, that is, we **are** a child or creature of God, but we grow into God's likeness. I think this helps explain the Epistle passage a bit. God invites us into Faith Hope and Love. God, as Love is continually creating the universe and us.

Next we come to the Gospel and one of the most famous passages in scripture. First it starts with the snake story and likens Jesus to that image. We have often been taught that Jesus had to die because of our sins. In other words, to appease this angry, impatient God who is just waiting for us to make a mistake so that He (it's always He) can condemn us. But if God is Love does this make sense?

This particular scripture has been used to exclude people; people of other faith traditions, other cultures or no faith or society's outcasts. I have come to question this. I was very fortunate to grow up with a loving, kind father. He was flawed like all of us, but he taught me to accept people and be fascinated by and love all of God's creatures. He lived humbly in the world and worked hard for his family. Due to his early exposure to a very strict and judgmental church, he never darkened the doors of church as an adult. So, when he died was this man of "no faith" not accepted by the God of love?

I would like to look at Jesus in a different way from just God's plan for saving us "miserable sinners". According to Fr. Rohr, Jesus coming to the world is "not just about us". According to him Franciscans have always believed that Jesus' coming was **Plan A**, not a **Plan B** mop up effort needed because of Adam and Eve's sin. Jesus coming was the personification of God in the physical universe. According to John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan theologian in the Middle Ages (@1266-1308) His

coming was not occasioned by sin, but the sharing of God's own life, one so fruitful that it constantly seeks expression. Again according to Fr. Rohr, "Jesus is not a mere problem solver for sin, appeasing a God who seems to be much less than love, but an expression of God's love in the world so that we can see who we are in a creation that was made good, true, whole and already the glory and freedom of God.

I believe that Jesus was sent so that we could see God with a Face. He was the perfect Image and Likeness of God. He loved unconditionally and included the poor, women, strangers and outcasts of society. He called out injustices in his culture and his Religion. He healed people because it is in the nature of the God of Love to bring wholeness and healing. He shared food and helped his friends with their fishing. He was killed by the society and culture that couldn't accept that freedom. And he didn't stay dead, because he had too much of God's abundant life and love within him.

So, how do we who have this true bread and this light behave? As it says, "But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God".

First we need to remember, according to Sallie McFague that, "We are to see God's expression in nature and in ourselves". We are to care for and love all of God's creation. We are to find and express the gifts that God has given us.

We are to be thankful to God for our lives at all times. If we are in the wilderness, either of our own making or the wilderness thrust upon us, we are to look up. It's hard to see the wider picture with our heads down, worrying about what will come next or if God has deserted us. God does not desert us! We are in and of God.

We are to follow our Jesus, the living bread, doing the things God would have us do. We are to love everyone and this includes ourselves, our neighbors and even our enemies. We are to love all of creation and work for its restoration. We are to bring healing where it is needed and work for justice for those who are the "least

of these". We are to practice kindness. We are to **be** Love and show God's light to the world.