

Growing Our Own

Joshua 5:9-12

The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land....

Monday morning I read the texts for this week. I knew that the story of so-called prodigal son was coming up. What a rich story, always worth studying, contemplating, and talking about. But it was the Joshua passage immediately drew my attention. Who knows why or how this happens, that a particular bit of scripture grabs us at a particular time in our lives. On the surface, the narrative seems pretty straight-forward, even pedestrian. Yet I realized that this is a powerful little narrative. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel have crossed the Jordan river, led now by Joshua, and have camped on the plains near the Canaanite city of Jericho. Moses has just died, without being able himself to enter the land of the promise. Now God says to Joshua that the terror and shame of slavery in Egypt is finally over.

The people's first act is to celebrate the passover. What a significant that passover must have been! The passover is all about remembering the harshness of slavery in Egypt, and how God brought the people out, promising that they would have their own land, their own place. And here they were. It had finally come to pass. Through all the harshness of the wilderness wanderings, all the struggles to really believe that God would do what God promised, the failures of trust, the hunger, the discomfort--through all of that, they had come through.

God had sustained them in those years, spiritually and physically. Spiritually, the people were learning that the path to true freedom is not an easy one, but that God is with us as a leading and upholding Presence. And God provided food each day. The first time Israel saw it lying there on the ground like a heavy frost, they exclaimed (in Hebrew) *man hu?* So it was known as "manna," literally meaning, "What IS it?" The manna came every morning, but it had to be gathered and eaten that day, not hoarded. That was part of the deal called faith. To hoard was to show that one did not really trust God's providing what is needed each day, each moment. Jesus taught the same thing. Consider the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Do they worry what they will wear or where their next meal will come from? Look at them, and learn to trust.

The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says that God kept Israel in the wilderness for forty years to teach one lesson. But, oh, it was the most important lesson in the world -- what it means to live by faith, what it means to trust God, maker of heaven and earth and our own lives. That is true life, true freedom and liberation. God had promised the Israelites their own land. However, living in that land would not mean much if the people did not know how to live as God's people, as a community that loved God and shaped its life after God's love, compassion, mercy, and justice. The wilderness journey was not just a matter of getting from Egypt to Canaan. The journey itself was the important thing.

Now they were out of Egypt for good, and out of the wilderness. Their feet were on the land God had promised as their home. The passover was celebrated, with every heart aching with gratitude and every eye tearful in remembrance and joy. And the next day -- here is what really got my attention -- the manna stopped, and the people ate from the produce of the land. What does this mean, that God no longer provided manna for the people, and that they began to eat the produce of the land? One kind of life had come to an end. Another kind of life had begun. The intensity of the journey in the wilderness was over. The people were now to engage in cultivating their life in this land. There was the austerity of the wilderness journey. There was this complete and raw dependence upon God for daily food and direction. It was the kind of experience in which we think, Surely this must have some purpose, some meaning. I don't know what it is, and I have no idea where I am going. All I can do is trust the One who is the source of life itself. All I can do is keep an open heart and mind, and take one step at a time.

I think we have all been there. It is a particular kind of experience, when we learn what faith really is and what it means to live by faith. The season of Lent is about such things. Remember the story of Jesus' temptation, how God's spirit drove him into the wilderness for forty days. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? There are times and experiences when all the props are knocked out from under us, where the things in which we found security vanish, when our lives feel stripped down to the bare bones. When a loved one dies. When we become seriously ill. When emotionally we can't keep up the appearance of having it all together. When a mission to which we've committed ourselves ends. When the confidence we placed in others is shattered. Or simply when

we realize that we really don't know what to do with our lives. The old doesn't work anymore, and we don't yet know what the new will be or how to do it. The story of Israel's wilderness wanderings is about just such experiences and just such faith. We are learning what faith, or trust, is all about, and we also begin to taste the manna of God's providing. Day by day, sometimes moment by moment, we begin to taste the ways that God sustains and leads us.

Yet our story is about another kind of experience, another dimension of the life of faith. The wilderness time is over, just as our wilderness times come to an end when we are open to living through them, not just enduring. There comes a time when we arrive at a new land. We turn once again to the work of living, of taking up our responsibilities and our relationships and doing the things we feel that God has called us to do. The text says that the day after the passover celebration, the manna ceased and the people began to eat the produce of the land. I don't think this means that they picked the fruit of trees that others had already planted, or harvested the grain others had sown. The sense of it is that they began to cultivate, to plant, to harvest, to cook, in other words, they began to do all the things needed to create a life for themselves. Manna was road food. Now they begin to taste home cooking!

What if we put it this way: The people no longer depended on God to feed them as God had done in the wilderness years. They now were to become self-reliant. God had this in mind all along. God made us human beings to live upon and as part of this earth, the creation, and to cultivate, tend, create, produce--to make a life for ourselves. Maybe the term "self-reliant" bothers us. It may sound as though I am saying that there are times when we no longer need God. Well, in a way, that is what I am saying, but not in the way you may think.

There is an old joke I first heard when serving a congregation of mostly farming families in Kentucky. The preacher came by to visit the old farmer. They took a walk, looking over the neatly-cultivated fields of corn and, if it was in central Kentucky, burley tobacco. At one point, the preacher said, "Well, Max, you and the Lord sure have made a fine looking farm here." The farmer hesitated a bit, then said, "Well, you should have seen it when the Lord had it by himself."

Someone shared with me a great insight recently. It was something like this. The purpose of our lives is not just to learn important things; it is to express and create, to contribute something to life. I love that. I think that conforms to the spirit of our community. Oh yes, there is much to learn throughout our lives. The inward journey we speak of is a constant learning, getting insights into ourselves, our relationships, the world around us, and God. But there is also the outward journey, knowing ourselves to be on this earth to contribute to life out of the gifts God gives to each of us.

There is something else. I think we are created so that we can find within ourselves what we need to live full and meaningful lives. The problem is that we often fall into dependency upon someone else, always looking to another person to validate us, to show us the way, to tell us the answers, and so forth. However, this leads to what we call co-dependency -- thinking we simply cannot live without this or that other person or idea or place or whatever. Jesus said the same thing. Don't look here or there for the kingdom of God. It is not "out there". It is right next to you, even within you (Lk. 17:20-21). We keep looking for manna when God is revealing to us our own place, our own life. We can grow our own! We can draw our nourishment from these lives God has given us to live. We can contribute to life with the gifts God has given us to share, including the very gift of our unique lives.

I don't know whether or not any of this makes sense to you. There is a lot more about this little story from Joshua that I want to reflect on, and a few days isn't long enough, for me at least, to get all the meaning of it. Yet it seemed to me that the spiritual life, or journey if you will, is sometimes in the desert, the wilderness, where we go back to learning the core meaning of faith -- trust in and openness to God in each moment, each step of the way. And when we find ourselves on the wilderness journey, we also discover that God does provide manna, the nourishment we need for soul or body, but moment by moment, one day at a time, and in surprising ways. We have to look for it each morning, each day.

Sometimes, though, we find ourselves where God has been leading us all along, to a new land, which, we discover, is the very place we are and the very life we already have. We don't forget Egypt. We don't forget the wilderness. But we LIVE where we are. We eat the produce of our own land. We cultivate our own lives and life around us, never forgetting that we are people who have known and tasted God's love, justice, compassion, and liberating power. There are times when we need the road food that God provides. But where God ultimately wants us is where we grow our own, where we eat home cooking.