

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13B) August 2, 2009
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 Ephesians 4:1-16

Psalms 78:23-29 John 6:24-35

Bread of Life

Jesus said... "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." [John 6:35]

Forty years ago, America put a man on the moon. I expect that many of us read an article or two about the 40th anniversary, or watched some of the television shows that looked back at this momentous event. But as far as I know there is one fact that the media did not mention in its recent coverage of the first moon landing. Forty years ago Holy Communion was celebrated for the first time somewhere other than planet Earth. After the Apollo 11 lunar module landed safely on the moon, and "before Neil Armstrong emerged from the space capsule to become the first human to stand somewhere other than Earth, Mr. Armstrong and his fellow astronaut Buzz Aldrin, an Episcopalian, quietly celebrated Holy Eucharist"¹ using bread and wine that had already been consecrated.

I find this a wonderfully evocative image. I think of these two men roaring their way up into the sky, moving beyond the pull of gravity and the blue-green sphere of our planet, passing through the silence and darkness of space, traveling to an entirely new place, and sharing Communion *there* -- as if to say: God's redeeming love is found here, too. God created everything that is, God's love penetrates and sustains every part of the universe, and God in Christ will be our companion wherever we go. God is giving us bread for the journey.

Today is the second of five Sundays in which the Gospel reading is drawn from chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, and it is all about bread. Last Sunday we heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and today and for the next three Sundays we will work our way through Jesus' discourse (or extended meditation) on the Bread of Life.

¹ *The Living Church*, Sept 7, 2003, p. 23. July 20, 1969 is the date of the moon landing and of the first Eucharist on the moon.

I would like to focus our attention on the story that is paired with this morning's Gospel, the Exodus story of the Hebrew people complaining -- as they do many times -- that they are hungry and tired and disgusted beyond endurance with their wandering in the wilderness. "[Oh,]" they cry to Moses and Aaron, "if only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" [Exodus 16: 3].

The people are impatient and anxious and at the end of their rope. What interests me is that God doesn't quickly tell them to quit complaining. God doesn't instantly rebuke them and accuse them of being snivelers or whiners. God doesn't tell them to shut up and to grow up. God listens to their angry grumbling that they are hungry, and God gives them food. Let's think about that for a moment. We may have a notion that a good Christian never complains to God, that a good Christian always trusts God completely and never utters a word of complaint or dissatisfaction. But in fact Holy Scripture gives us plenty of permission to share with God the frustration or the grief that we may feel. The Book of Job makes that clear, as do the more than fifty psalms that express lament.

God wants to hear what is really going on in our lives, not just what looks good or sounds good. So maybe it is worth exploring for a moment our solidarity with the disgruntled and frightened Israelites. Are there any frustrations in our lives? Are there any laments that we need to express? Maybe there is a job we didn't get or a spouse we couldn't keep. Maybe we have college or retirement funds that vanished down a hole, or maybe there is a relationship that wakes us up at night, feeling sorrowful or scared. Are there areas of your life where you feel restless and dissatisfied, hungry for something more? Do you have any complaints? I expect that your answer is the same as mine: You bet I do!

And maybe that is a good thing. It is only when we feel and express a need that we really open ourselves to the gifts of God. We don't need or welcome food until we know that we are hungry. In this morning's story, God hears the people's complaining -- the passage even says it twice. God hears the complaining, and God declares, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day" [Exodus 16:4]. The food in the evening is meat -- quail -- and the food in the morning is a mysterious kind of bread called manna that falls during the night with the dew. Today's psalm calls manna "the bread of angels" [Psalm 78:25], but it is not really clear what manna is. The word 'manna' is itself a play on words from the Hebrew *mah hu* -- which means, 'What is it?' That is what the Israelites ask each other when they see the "fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground"

[Exodus 16:13]. “What is it”? *Mah hu*. So we might call manna “Whaddyacallit”² or maybe “Whachamacallit.” Some scholars say that manna was the sweet excretion of insects, and others say that manna is just the stuff of legend, a way of symbolizing how God fills our hunger and gives us life. But whatever manna is, it is only enough for a day, and only good for a day. As today’s passage explains later on, manna must be gathered on the spot -- if it is not gathered up at once, it melts under the heat of the sun. And manna can’t be hoarded. Try to store it, and it breeds worms and becomes foul [Exodus 16:20]. And don’t even try to take more than you need, because whatever is more than your share will simply vanish into thin air [Exodus 16:18].

So God hears our complaints, and God gives us food that lasts just for one day. “Give us this day our daily bread.” It is all about trust. We can’t grab more than we need. We can’t hoard more than our day’s allotment. We can’t ask God to fill us tomorrow and tomorrow and the day after that, any more than we can save up our breaths. All we can breathe is this breath, and then this breath. All we can do is to receive in gratitude today the bread that God is giving us today, trusting that the bread we will need tomorrow will be given to us tomorrow. “Give us this day our daily bread” is the prayer that Jesus taught us -- not “Give us this day a pile of bread for tomorrow” or “Give us this day a week’s worth of bread.” God will feed us only today, moment by moment. So we learn to live by trust, not ruthlessly grabbing and grasping at things, but opening our hands calmly to each moment, and saying, “*This* is the moment that the LORD has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

And the bread of God -- what *is* the bread of God? It is Christ Jesus himself, the one who came among us to give us life to the full, to call us out of our small, worried selves and to set us on a path to exuberant love for all Creation. In the Eucharist we take in our daily bread. We let ourselves be fed in the deep places of our soul that are anxious and longing and afraid. We let God touch us in our places of bitterness or despair, and we let ourselves be deeply fed.

My son Sam is away this summer, working as a counselor in a camp in New Hampshire, and he keeps asking me to smuggle him some food. Rice cakes are what he wants most -- not because they really fill him up -- you can hardly fill yourself on a rice cake, and I doubt that he is really hungry, anyway! But rice cakes fill him, I think, because they remind him of home. They are a sign to him

² Everett Fox came up with this term, as cited by Gail Ramshaw, *Christian Century*, July 28, 2009, p. 20.

that he is loved. As the old jingle says, “Nothin’ says lovin’ like something from the oven,” even if Mother herself didn’t cook it.

To the Eucharist this morning we bring our hunger for wholeness, our hunger for hope, for meaning, and for love. Like the Israelites, we come with our longing and complaints, and with a sharp awareness that we cannot feed ourselves. We open our hands to the Eucharist in trust, daring to believe that God is giving us everything we need, and that tomorrow God will take care of us just as surely as God is taking care of us today. We take this bread as a sign of Home, as a reminder that the One who loved us into being is with us every step of the way and that God in God’s good time will guide us Home. In every Eucharist, we meet those we love who have already gone home to God. We meet Horace Boyer in the Eucharist -- we meet everyone we love. Home is where we are heading, and home is what God gives us now, in every moment, in every taste of the consecrated bread and in every sip of the consecrated wine. God is with us wherever we journey, even if it is to the moon and back.

I would like to close with an invitation to the Eucharist that is based on a prayer of the Iona community in Scotland.

This is the table of Christ,
 our host through all eternity.
 So come, you who feel weak and unworthy,
 you who come often
 and you who have stayed away.
 Come, you who love him
 and you who wish you could.
 Come, you who are hungry
 for friendship or forgiveness.
 Come, you who long for meaning or a just world.³

Come.

³ Ray Simpson, *Healing the Land: Natural seasons, sacraments and special services, The Celtic Prayer Book, Volume Three*, Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew, Ltd., 2004.