

“Bread and Freedom”

Exodus 16:2-21; John 6:1-15; Galatians 4:26

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent 2022; March 27, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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The readings from God’s word this morning involve bread and freedom. The bread came as gift. So did the freedom.

Bread first comes up with the people of Israel. It is about 60 days after they had left Egypt (Exodus 16:1). God calls Egypt the house of bondage. The people of Israel called it different things. They probably called it the house of bondage when they were toiling away for the Egyptians, being oppressed by them. When they are in the wilderness and free, however, on the way to the promised land, the going was getting a little tough. Then Egypt for them became the place where they sat by pots full of meat and ate bread to the full (Exodus 16:3).

But God remains true. He calls Egypt the house of bondage. They say it is better to die in Egypt as slaves with bellies full of meat and bread. God disagrees. He thinks it is better to die in the wilderness of thirst and starvation and in faith, that is, having God and being free.

But God wasn’t going to let them die in the wilderness. He says to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you (Exodus 16:5 ESV). God provided for them all the way.

God provided bread. God also provided meat (Exodus 16:13). God provided the manna in the morning. It was there on the ground when they got up waiting for them to collect it. God provided the meat in the form of quail in the evening. The manna ceased when they entered the promised land and ate the produce of the land for the first time (Joshua 5:12).

It is interesting to note the before and after. The before is when God was about to bring the tenth sign and wonder upon the Egyptians, the slaying of the first born of man and animal, and Moses was giving instructions to the people. They were quite specific instructions. “All the people of Israel did just as the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron” (Exodus 12:50 ESV).

When you read that part of the story, there is excitement brewing. The mind becomes sharp. Courage is fortified for action. Spirits are lifted and full of light. There is great faith and great resolve. There is no fear. There is no worry. “We are being led by God out of bondage,” they say. God is our hero. Moses and Aaron are wonderful.

Then there is the Red Sea. God led them to the shore of the Red Sea on purpose (Exodus 14:1). But Pharaoh and the Egyptian army were coming after them. Trapped. Spirits began to change. Why, Moses, did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it because there are no graves there? Did you think it would be better for the Egyptians to kill us out here in the wilderness? (Exodus 14:11). This was fear talking.

God took them through the Red Sea, a wall of water on the right and a wall of water on the left (Exodus 14:29). The Egyptian army perished in the Red Sea. Miriam, Aarons sister, led some other women in singing and dancing, saying: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15:21 ESV).

But now it is 60 days later. Now they say, God must have brought us out into the wilderness so we could die. What are you doing, God? It would have been better if . . . , God.

But would it really?

This sequence is one where they go from the exhilaration of the moment of deliverance through the mighty act of God in the Red Sea into the wilderness where the walk of faith really begins. And in that wilderness they come face to face with what they are made of. This is one of

the reasons for the wilderness. It tests our metal, and we grow in faith. We can't stay at the Red Sea forever, especially not since God's intent is to lead us to the promised land.

The going is hard in the wilderness, no doubt about it. They grumble and complain. God gives them bread from heaven to eat anyway.

But now that they are in the wilderness. It is not like they don't need God anymore and can do it on their own. What if we were to say to them? Stop grumbling and do something about it. You need food. Plant a crop. You need meat. Expand your herds.

But then they could say, "Look around. We are in the wilderness. Look at this ground. It is rock hard and the soil is lousy. We couldn't set a plow to this ground to grow a crop, even if we wanted to. And, by the way, look at the sky and landscape around this place. There is not a cloud in it, and we have not seen a cloud much less a rain storm for 60 days. It doesn't rain here. Do you see any trees? It is desert wilderness. We couldn't grow a crop here even if we tried. And, by the way, we are on the move. This is not our destination."

So they are in a place where they have to realize that everything is a gift from God. They relied on God's grace not only when they were leaving Egypt and at the Red Sea, but always. God gave them bread and meat. God gave them freedom. God remains faithful to His people always.

Fast forward to the hills above the Sea of Galilee. There Jesus is sitting with His disciples. A large crowd has gathered to see Him and hear Him speak. Maybe He will work some more miracles. That crowd consisted of about 5000 thousand men, not including women and children (John 6:10).

It is significant to consider the size of that crowd. If we include women and children in the count, how many would it have been? What should our multiplier be for the ratio of women and children to the men, on average: 1.5, .5? 1.5 would yield 7500 women and children. .5 would be 2500. If the multiplier were .5, the crowd that day would be approaching 7500 people.

It is a wilderness area in its own way. There are no villages nearby. On our terms we would say that there was no grocery, no convenience store, or drive-in nearby to get some food and drink. Jesus says to Philipp, "Where are we going to buy bread so that these people may eat?" (John 6:5).

Philipp says, "Are you crazy? Two hundred denarii, that is, two hundred day's wages, would not be enough money to buy enough food" (John 6:7). Andrew was listening to this. In fact, they all probably were. He says to Jesus: "There is a boy here with five loaves of bread made of barley and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9).

Yes quite. Andrew can use his reason and do the math, more or less. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that these five loaves and two fish won't even put a dent in trying to feed this crowd.

Jesus says, "Have the people sit down" (John 6:10). He knew what He was going to do. He took the bread and gave thanks. He began to distribute it. Everyone ate from those five loaves and two fish to the full. They even collected 12 baskets full of fragments (John 6:12-13).

Impossible, yet there it is.

If anyone had had the wherewithal to see beyond just the fact that their stomachs were full, they could have looked up at Jesus and wondered, who is this guy, when they realize what He did. And many of them did do that. They came to a conclusion: This is the prophet (John 6:14). The prophet they are talking about is the one promised by God through Moses in Deuteronomy 18 (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Come let us make Jesus king (John 6:15).

Oh He was more than just a prophet. He was the LORD who was looking down at the

Egyptians from the pillar of cloud as they were going into the Red Sea (Exodus 14:24). Here He is standing there with His two feet on the ground, feeding His people with bread and meat.

Wait a second. Did I just say two feet on the ground? God does not have feet; what is more self-evident than that. He does now.

What did the crowd that day do for the bread they received? Nothing. It was gift. Jesus did it to show them that there was an even more profound gift from God who was standing there in their midst feeding them.

Not too far in the future from that event, the crowd would shout something much different about Him than “this is the prophet; let’s make him king.” Jesus could not let them take Him that day of the feeding and make Him king (John 6:15). There is a deeper need you and I have that Jesus must provide the bread for.

But Jesus not letting them make Him king is probably also why they were shouting something different about Him on that day not too far in the future. “Crucify Him,” they said (John 19:15). “Shall I crucify your king,” says Pilate (John 19:15). “We have no king but Caesar,” say the leaders of the people (John 19:15).

What were they saying? We know no world but this one. We know no wisdom but what is of this world. We know no other need but to have stomachs full of food, a perfect physical existence, and the comforts and entertainments of this world. These are the ultimate things. And we thought Jesus would be the one to provide these things when He fed us on the mountain, but we were mistaken. Crucify Him. He is no use to us.

They did. God raised Him from the dead (John 19:30; John 20:11-16).

Sure enough, God cares for our physical well-being and Jesus teaches us to pray for it, as in the fourth petition of the Lord’s prayer. But this is in the framework of faith, where God is our ultimate good: “Seek first His kingdom and these things will be added,” Jesus says (Matthew 33).

But Jesus and God knew that in Jesus’ suffering He was obtaining a deliverance infinitely more significant than the bread He multiplied and fed them with in the hills above the Sea. He was obtaining for them the deliverance from the condemnation of the law against sin. He was obtaining for them a food that is the food of forgiveness and immortality. It is the food of peace with God and communion with Him in a real community that is beyond comprehension now, but which we will experience in full one day. It is the food that is the promise of God’s faithfulness, grace, and favor toward you in the wilderness. He was obtaining a joy beyond the fleeting feel-goods and glories of worldly entertainments. It is the joy of God Himself, who is the only real ultimate satisfaction for our souls. The bread He gives is Himself, so that we can participate in the Jerusalem above that is free, of which He is king. And so we shall participate in it fully, in Him, even as we participate in it now with longing and hope.

He promises this to us as He gives Himself in another kind of bread, in another feast; the feast of His body and blood. This feast is in the mystery, according to His word, but which becomes for us the most holy place, where God meets us in Jesus. Where God meets us in Jesus, we are free and on the way to Jerusalem, whatever our wandering in this wilderness may bring. And God remains faithful to us all the way. And in the end He leads us to the promised land, where our home is, the Jerusalem above that is free, which is the mother of us all and the destination of our journey (Galatians 4:26). Amen.