

The whole congregation of the people of Israel was hungry, even starving, there in the wilderness. “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.” How selective they were with their memories when they became so hungry they thought they couldn’t take it anymore. “We sat around meat pots and ate all we wanted! They really are hallucinating! They were slaves. But in their hunger they didn’t remember the pain of a whip across their backs; they didn’t remember toiling from sun up until sun down; they could only think about the fleeting pleasures of a meal.

So they grumbled. The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron (truly, against God himself), wishing that they were dead or in slavery, rather than free although hungry. What my high school history teacher taught us really is true: people will give up almost anything, even freedom, for a sense of security.

It is said, “Baseball is our national passtime.” I think grumbling and complaining is. Grumbling is as much a staple of life as our daily bread. We grumble at work, at school, and at home and at church. It is so easy to point out where things could be better and how we could certainly do a better job if only we were in charge. We become experts at second-guessing pastors and presidents and politicians and policemen and principals and POA’s. We fall into the trap of complaining when more constructive feedback and involvement is what is really needed. Do you remember the story in Exodus 17 in which Aaron and Hur held up the arms of Moses as Joshua and the children of Israel fought the Amelekites? The Amelekites were a formidable enemy. The battle was long and difficult. When Moses held up his arms the Israelites prevailed. When he grew weary and his arms began to fall, the Amelekites began to win. So they found a rock for Moses to sit on and Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ arms. One day they hold up the arms of the prophet, and another day they take potshots at him and complain about his wife, Miriam. We see in the people of Israel our own sinful nature.

Hunger was not their sin, it was just a fact. Asking God or Moses for meat and bread was not sinful. Indeed, God invites us come to Him as children come to their own fathers and ask for things according to His will. Their sin—even our sin—is the sin of believing that God’s promises are not true, refusing to believe the Word of the Lord, and looking elsewhere for comfort and provision. God had promised a land of plenty and of security, a land where they could worship Him without fear, delivered from the hands of their enemies. Was it too difficult to hunger for a time in order to be blessed for eternity? Is it too difficult to endure the crosses and trials of this life—for a time—knowing that beyond the time of trials lies another country, where we will not hunger nor thirst nor want for any good thing?

For our sinful natures, it IS all too difficult. Left to ourselves, we will choose the easy road, the full belly, the soft bed, the comfortable shoes, and so we deserve nothing but God’s present and eternal punishment. We will reject a theology of the cross, where we are called to take up our

crosses and follow Jesus, suffering for a time and receiving bliss for eternity. So we grumble against the servants of God, which is really against God Himself.

God hears our grumbles. He heard the grumbling of all the congregation of the people of Israel, and He hears the grumbling of all the congregation of people gathered here. He hears and He speaks His word; though it is not the word we expect or deserve; it's a word of grace and mercy, a word of provision.

“I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God’ ” (Ex 16:12). God heard their sinful grumbling and answered it as though it were a prayer, providing them meat and bread and demonstrating the abounding love He has for His people and for the whole world. Even in their sinful grumbling, God gives them good gifts, so how much more will He keep the promises He has made to His faithful people?

We see God's fatherly love as He fed and preserved the people of Israel even as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness – manna and quail each day, water from a rock that accompanied them, shade from a cloud that went with them, their clothes and their shoes did not wear out. We see God's fatherly love as He even feeds and preserves us, giving us all that we need to support this body and life: *The means to earn a living that now enables you to go to brunch or to eat a scrumptious meal to squelch your growing stomach, followed by a nap in a comfortable bed in an air conditioned home in a safe community in a free nation.* Each day the Lord rains down His daily bread to us and even to all evil people. Paul said, “As we have food and clothing, let us be content with that, not grumbling and clamoring for more, but receiving it all with thanks to God” for remembering us and our needs.

The children of Israel did not feed on figurative bread; the manna they gathered each day was real bread that really did fill their bellies. The quail that would settle on the camp was real meat for the people of Israel to eat. Soon the Lord would give them real water from a real rock to drink while on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Truly the Lord was the source of all that they needed to support this body and life. He gave them clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home—all that they had – even as He does us.

In the Sinai desert, God fed His people with bread from heaven so that they would know that “I am” is the Lord their God. Fourteen hundred years later, Jesus feeds a congregation on a hillside that they would know that He is the true bread come down from heaven. “Jesus then said to them, **‘Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ ”** (Jn 6:32–33).

As we travel through this desolate world of sin, do we indeed hunger and thirst for righteousness as much as we do after daily bread; physical things the Lord has promised to give us. Jesus encourages in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be satisfied” The Exodus was and remains to this day the defining

event in Jewish life and culture. With Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit the people of Israel were as good as dead, but Moses raised his staff and the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea in safety and soon thereafter the waters crashed down onto Israel's enemies. God freed them from slavery and gave them a whole new life to live under His grace and mercy. St. Paul, in the New Testament, uses this passing through the waters of the Red Sea as a basis for our understanding of Holy Baptism. All of us, and all the children of God, have come through the Red Sea waters of Holy Baptism; we have been given deliverance from our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. They have been drowned in a cleansing flood of water and the Word. Now, no matter what might happen to us in this life, there is no going back to slavery and servitude, no matter how enticing the memories may be. Instead, we are fed and filled up with true meat and drink, the Bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, namely Jesus Christ.

Your deliverance has been won; you are given life by Jesus in His suffering and death, burial and resurrection. There on the cross, Jesus endured all the wrath of God for your sin. See Him wandering, hungering, thirsting, suffering, and dying—paying the wages of sin. There is your life, there is your journey, there is your cross, and it has already been taken up as Jesus is lifted up. There, too, is your grave, and it has been slept in already for three days, after which Jesus rose to life again, assuring that you, too, will rise to new life in Him.

On Thursday morning sometimes I sometimes join friends at the Jessieville High School Track for "speed training." After our run we go to Home Plate for breakfast. Before eating I say a prayer and ask God's to bless our food. One day in my prayer I mentioned God blessing the Israelites with daily bread in the form of manna to take care their physical needs. Later, in our conversation, one of them commented, "I wonder what manna really looked like; what was it, Pastor Mark?" I said "yes." That is what the word manna means. When it first appeared the Israelites asked, "What is it?" Literally the Hebrew word for manna means "What is it?"

In the face of such grace and mercy, we can stop and ask, "What is this?" "What is all this stuff that God should provide so much for the likes of me?" Moses answered the people of Israel, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat" (v 15). What is this? It is the bread of comfort in the face of earthly trials; it is the true food of grace that sustains us all our days of wandering here in time so that we can live with God in eternity; it is the Bread of God that gives life to the world; it is God's grace and mercy found in Jesus alone.

(GOD HEARS EVEN OUR GRUMBLES AND ANSWERS US ACCORDING TO OUR GREATEST NEED.)

God's promises are true. He has not forgotten you, no matter how *hungry* you may be (for food or righteousness), no matter how far you may have wandered or how you have grumbled for the former days. He has heard your cry and surely provides all that you need to support this body and life and all that you need for the life of the world to come. He has heard your cry. Child of God, now hear his gracious voice as he speaks comfort to you, declaring all your sins forgiven, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.