

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 4-5, 2018)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“Did you bring us out here to kill us?” In the summer of 1975, our Scout troop was at summer camp in the Poconos. The TV weather guys had warned that a tropical storm was on the Atlantic Coast, and could possibly jog inland over New Jersey. We all agreed that Jersey could use a good shower (!), but some parents asked, “Would our boys be in the woods in the middle of a hurricane?”

The answer to that question was “Yes.” We were in our tents as tropical winds raged. Large branches fell from the trees. Several tents collapsed.

We started grumbling among ourselves. And when our scout master finally appeared in the middle of the night, once scout just blurted out, “Did you bring us out here to kill us?”

Maybe it’s because of that experience that I feel great compassion for the Israelites in today’s first reading.

The people of Israel are out there in the desert wilderness. They are tired and hungry. Israel felt lost. So they shout to God, “Did you bring us out here to kill us?”

On one hand, you want to critique their lack of trust. Just a few days before this scene, the Israelites were *slaves* in Egypt. For generations, they had no freedom, only grinding work.

Then Moses arrives, telling the Israelites that God has heard their prayer. Moses goes to Pharaoh and demands freedom for the slaves. But Pharaoh is not giving away his free labor force!

Then... God starts working miracles. The plagues upon Egypt. The death of every first born Egyptian. Pharaoh finally frees the Israelites. *Freedom from slavery*. Can you imagine?

Then God becomes a kind of spiritual GPS, leading Israel using a visible column of smoke and fire. But Israel’s divine GPS leads them right to the shore of Red Sea. Water in front - the Egyptian army chasing behind.

The people panic. But Gods says, “Follow me,” right through the sea. And they are saved.

They might have some Red Sea mud on them in today’s reading. They’d seen all those miracles coming out of Egypt. But now they are in the desert. They have the munchies.

So they complain to God, “Did you bring us out here to kill us?”

Please remember this – *they are not lost!* They are where they are because God had guided them there. God guided them into this desert that feels godforsaken!

So when they complain, “Did you bring us out here to kill us?” they are absolutely justified. And they happen to be correct.

God has led them there to kill them.

(You won't hear that from Joel Osteen!)

God brought them to this desert so that the desert can be the death of them; so that their hunger can be the tool through which God kills their old, sinful self.

Think of it this way: Physically, they were no longer slaves in Egypt. God's miracles accomplished that.

Physically, they were free. But, having walked safely through the Red Sea, now they're complaining because there's no Wawa nearby where they can buy a cheesesteak.

So what do they do? They stop trusting God, and they start thinking that things were 'so much better back in Egypt.' Yes, back in 'the good old days' when we were slaves – because, back then, we knew that if we worked hard we'd at least have something to eat.

Former slaves, begging for permission to go back to slavery, all because of a cheesesteak...

The Israelites recall their bondage to Pharaoh fondly, which is proof that they are not yet free. In their hearts and minds, they are still slaves – slaves who find their identity in 1) the work they are given to do and 2) the food they get in return. And they are so nostalgic for that 'security' that they are willing to give up their god-given freedom.

So God brings them to the desert for a different kind of deliverance.

When they call out, “Did you bring us out here to kill us?” The answer is “yes.” I the Lord have brought you out here, because, in your hearts and minds, you are still slaves, seeking security in your work and your belly. And that has to die. That part of you that doesn't trust God, has to die.

They don't trust God. But God doesn't punish them. Instead, God gives them gourmet quail,

every night, as more proof of God's abundance.

And as the dew dried off in the morning air, there was 'mana.' The original Wonder Bread!

When we Catholics hear about bread in the Bible, we often think of the Bread of life. We think of the Eucharist bread – the miracle of the Lord's presence.

But, do you know where bread first appears in the Bible? Bread is first mentioned as God throws Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, all they had to do was trust God and enjoy the fruit.

But because they DID NOT trust God, they are cast out of the Garden, and God says, "from now on, you will get your bread by working hard, by the sweat of your brow."

When bread first appears in the Bible, it's a reminder – God is trustworthy, but you didn't trust him. So now you work hard to get some bread.

Until – out in that desert where God led Israel, bread appears, and human beings just have to receive it as a gift, and trust that it would be there again tomorrow.

The mana, the bread of heaven, is the tool God is using to kill off those fearful, forgetful parts of the Israelites, those parts of us which still do not trust our abundant God.

The mana is bread they did not have to work for. It was God's way of saying to all of us: 'trust me. And don't you dare get nostalgic for all those old things you used to find security in.'

God is saying, I brought you out here to kill you... that is, to once and for all get rid of that part of you which thinks that the meaning of your life is found in the work you do and what you get in return.

God is saying, you are so much more than a slave to your work, and the bread that you eat. You are not defined by the patterns, addictions, sins which try to control you. I set you free so that you will know that you can trust me... for everything.

In today's Gospel, we are just a couple of hours after Jesus has fed 5000 people... with bread.

And what do some folks do? They forget the miracle they just saw, because they have the munchies again. They ask Jesus for *another* miracle...

Then they ask, "What do we have to do in order to do the work of God?"

They are thinking like slaves: tell us what to do, then give us the bread we've earned.

Jesus answers by saying, "This is the work of God..." In other words, God is doing the work! God is taking care of you!

Back in the desert, the Israelites looked at the mana, wondering where it came from, amazed that they didn't have to work for it. All they had to do was receive it.

Christians are called to look at the mystery of Jesus, who is the bread of life. All he asks is that we understand: we don't have to work to earn his love. All we have to do is receive it, trust it, trust him.

You are not slave. You are not defined by your past, by your work in the present, or by the sins which still try to enchain you.

God has brought you here, so that those parts of you which do not trust the Lord's love can die in the shadow of the cross. Then your true and trusting self, your *free* self, can shine forth.

We stand before Jesus, the bread of life. We marvel at his abundance... an abundance we don't deserve, an abundance we can receive, and trust.

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