

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Lent Midweek 4 – March 30, 2022
Exodus 16:2-21 – God Nourishes the Sons of Dust
By Vicar Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Our text is the Old Testament reading for the fourth Sunday of Lent, from Exodus 16, when God gave his people manna to eat in the wilderness.

Last week we heard about the Ten Plagues against Egypt. God used his servant Moses to strike the dust of the land in judgment, bringing gnats and flies and boils on the Egyptians. But God's judgment meant redemption for the sons of dust. God made a distinction between the Egyptians and his people, so that those who believed were spared. The Israelites believed God's promise of salvation, they slaughtered the Passover lambs in place of their eldest sons. And God brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand. So God claims us as his sons, he keeps his promise of redemption to us. He calls us to trust that he is in control. He calls us to put away our sin and trust in Christ our Passover Lamb.

In today's text, right after the Exodus, the sons of Israel have entered the dusty wilderness. In the wilderness, food and water are scarce. Survival depends on God. We can only survive by God's grace, lest we die and decay to dust. In the wilderness, man cannot live by bread alone, but only by the word of God. Yet instead of trusting God for all their needs of body and soul, the people grumbled. Gone was their faith at Passover. Although they witnessed God's mighty works in Egypt, they did not even trust him to provide their daily bread to eat.

Even so, the God who patiently gave Pharaoh so many chances to turn and repent was even more patient and merciful with his sons. He never forsook them. Psalm 78 recounts the Exodus story, “[**God**] **performed wonders in the land of Egypt... He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers.**”¹

The God who brought his people through the Red Sea and gave them water to drink from the rock is a God who can be trusted. But when he led them through the wilderness and they were hungry, their trust evaporated. Just one month after leaving Egypt, they began to grumble. And this was only the beginning of forty years of rebellion. They longed for the meat pots and blamed Moses for bringing them out to kill them. Psalm 78 continues: “**When the Lord heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power. Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance. He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind; he rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; he let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved.**”² So God was patient with his wayward sons. He graciously rained down quail and manna from heaven like dust. He sent nourishing bread of life to sustain them in their earthly sojourn.

As we heard in the sermon about Jacob wrestling with God, we are God's sons who have the right to wrestle with him. He wants us to bring our troubles to him and call on him for help. Such wrestling is called lament. Lament holds God to his promises and trusts his deliverance. Lament demands God's answer by crying out in faith. Lament means calling on God, not complaining to Moses and Aaron who can't do anything about it.

¹ Psalm 78:12-16

² Psalm 78:21-29

Grumbling is not the same as lament. Grumbling only blames God for our trouble and says, “I would be better off without you.” So because the Israelites grumbled and did not trust God, because they listened to the bad report of the spies, because they did not believe God would give them the land of Canaan, God made them wander in the desert for forty years.

Even in the wilderness, God was still patient. He stayed with his people. He led them. He sent them manna week after week, year after year. And the God who was patient with his sons in the wilderness is also patient with us. He who brought us out of bondage to sin and redeemed us by the blood of Jesus is faithful. He who brought us through baptism – just as he brought Israel through the Red Sea waters – he stays with us.

After baptism, our life is a life of wandering in the desert of this world. We grumble, we go astray. Psalm 78 may as well be about us, **“Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them... With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.”**³

Throughout these years of your testing, God is patient. The forty days of Lent teach that he sent his Son to seek and to save the lost, to carry you home on his shoulder. As Moses reminded the people, **“In the wilderness you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son.”**⁴ Apart from Christ, you would perish. He gives you this day your daily bread, everything you need and exactly the right amount. **“Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”**

Jesus is here with you in the wilderness. He calls you back from straying. He nourishes you by his word and sacrament. His absolution is an abundant fountain of life, so you never thirst again. His body is your bread of life, given for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.

So keep your eyes on Jesus. Look to your Redeemer. By faith, see the new and greater son of Israel, the man who forsook the meat pots, who didn’t eat or drink in the wilderness for forty days. He trusted God’s word. He was tempted in every way as you are, yet remained without sin. By faith, see your new and greater Moses, who fulfilled the Ten Commandments for you. He forgives you and sends the Spirit to teach you his commandments. By faith, see your new and greater Aaron, your great high priest who offered his lifeblood in your place. He passed through the heavens for you. He intercedes for you before the Father, so you might approach the throne of grace with confidence. And by faith, see your new and greater Joshua, your Savior. His name means, “The Lord saves.” He will drive out Satan and bring you into the true rest of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus tells you in John chapter 6, **“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst... Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh... Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”**⁵

Therefore, O sons of dust, when you come to the Lord’s Supper, receive his body and blood in faith. Do not be like the sons of Israel, who took the manna for granted, who did not recognize Christ’s presence in the water from the rock. Believe that this heavenly food is given for you, for your redemption. And take comfort, since your Lord loves you and patiently carries you. Psalm 103, **“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”**⁶ Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

³ Psalm 78:37-38, 72

⁴ Deuteronomy 1:31

⁵ John 6:35, 47-51, 54-55

⁶ Psalm 103:11-14