

Fast Food Faith
Exodus 16:2-16
John 6:24-35

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the good that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

When the lectionary drops us into the sixteenth chapter of Exodus, we find ourselves not only in the wilderness, but also in the company of some very unhappy campers. It has been a little over a month since Pharaoh had let the Israelites go; a little over a month since God had led them in the direction of the Red Sea; a little over a month since they had run for their lives from the Egyptian army, asking Moses as they ran into the sea, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”

After their escape and the Egyptian army’s demise, you might expect God’s people to be awash in gratitude, but not. In the wilderness of Shur, with no potable water, they complain against Moses until he cries to the Lord and the Lord sweetens the bitter water of Marah. Following a night in Elim, “where there were seven springs of water and seventy palm trees,” they enter the wilderness of Sin. Again, no water *and* now, no food. The whole congregation of the Israelites complain against Moses and Aaron, saying that it would have been better to die with full stomachs in Egypt than as hungry nomads in the wilderness. What is going on here, and what has any of it to do with this whole congregation of Presbyterians in Chestnut Hill?

According to Avivah Zornberg, a most incredible reader of Scripture, in the story of the Israel’s experience in the wilderness, the Torah is tracing “the abrupt metabolic changes in the narrative of a people for whom, in the most obvious way, the body is a reality; the stomach, the innards, the heart, remain a continual reminder,” she says, “of dependence, risk, relationship.” It was not by chance that the Israelites fled Egypt with no provisions, with only enough time to

grab the bread that had not yet risen, unleavened bread that would remind them, to this day, of the God who delivered them from slavery. With no means to sustain themselves, they entered a space and time where the needs of their bodies were a continual reminder of dependence, risk and relationship.

I think of the families threatened, even now, by wild fires, who are given only enough time to throw their bodies into the car and floor it for safety; I think of the millions of refugees fleeing Syria who traverse the deserts just as their ancestors once did, with only the clothes on their backs; I think of those who have left the death that stalked them in Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, and Gambia for a place in a boat and on the sea no god is parting these days. I even think of some of you who are presently leaving behind the life you have known and entering a time and space of relative emptiness, where aging bodies will be a continual reminder of dependence, risk and relationship.

The Exodus, story, it seems to me, lets us in on the inner debate that happens in the wilderness times and places of our lives—sometimes imposed by circumstances and sometimes entered into by choice--when emptiness and not-knowing and boredom and fear and God vie for our future selves. It is a journey from the having of a misremembered past, to a present of not having, to a future of longing for what really matters.

In the wilderness of the Sinai desert, the Israelites misremember the past. The hunger of their bodies leads them to misremember the beatings, the threats, the terror, the hopelessness. Forgetting the conditions that stripped them of their humanity, they tell Moses that they would rather go back to life under Pharaoh, when at least they had their fill of bread. We are no strangers to misremembering in this way: misremembering a marriage, a relationship, a job, a time of life, a place through the filter of bodily need and the fear of not being at all. From the

perspective of every present wilderness, not-knowing where sustenance will come from, not-trusting the next step we will take, not-seeing the horizon but only the arid landscape, we think we would trade every risk that defines this moment for the known conditions of the past; we think we would trade this dependence on an unseen God for dependence on whoever or whatever it was that literally owned our lives.

Then in the aftermath of misremembering, the reality of not-having begins to settle in. Now the Hebrew word on the lips of the Israelites and Moses and God is *Mah*: What? In fact, according to Zornberg, God places the Israelites in the wilderness so that they may have the space and time to ask the “*mah*” questions that “begin in physical experience and explore meanings, of past, present and future.” There are the straightforward “*mah*” questions: “What shall we drink? What shall we eat?” Then there are the “*mah*” questions that are better translated “why”: “What is this you have done to us,” they ask Moses and through him ask God, “Why have you done this to us?” These are the reflective, subversive, restless questions that surface in the wilderness, and function to plumb the depths, to push against the limits of human knowing, to insist on unmasking the mystery. “The effect is to move beyond the world of facile rationalization, to become aware of the incongruities, gaps between the ‘public narrative’ and the inner debate. In this sense,” Zornberg says, “the people’s [complaint], ugly, ungrateful, and misdirected as it may be, represents a necessary truthfulness, a way of opening up a new depth of dialogue with Moses and with God.”

Now I am thinking of the raw questions surfacing daily in the face of the deaths of Sam Dubose, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown and Eric Garner to name a few. The “*mah*” questions surfacing in our present wilderness of gun violence and economic disparity and fear of the other, are questions that may have the effect of moving us

beyond the world of facile rationalizations, to become aware of incongruities, gaps between the 'public narrative' and the inner debate. The "mah" questions, ugly and misdirected as they may seem to those of us who do not know the terror of driving while black, for instance, are insinuating a necessary truthfulness, a way of opening up a new depth of dialogue, our bodies being a continual reminder of the dependence and risk and relationship that constitute our life together in this present wilderness. [Again, I urge you to read Ta-Nahisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*]

In response to their questions, God rains bread from heaven. In the morning, when the dew lifted, "there was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?'" They said to one another, "Mah?" The word is the word for "manna." "...encrypted in the name manna, it seems, is the 'un-knowing' of the [Israelites'] first response: the awareness, perhaps, of an enduring mystery, beyond all explanations." Like the question "mah" itself, "the manna sustains in as far as it baffles the banal definitions of the knowing mind." "Mah" feeds them, fills them, satisfies them, and sustains them. Daily, it is just enough. It cannot be hoarded or stored up with one exception. On the sixth day of the week, enough is given and gathered for the seventh, for the Sabbath, for the day that belongs to God. "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord." *Mah?* What is this? The Israelites ask and eat the questions. What have you done to us? God has delivered you from Egypt and has led you into the wilderness of dependence and risk and relationship for one reason. "The purpose of the Exodus is 'to know that I am God.'"

It seems to me, if this story is in any way our story, then the wilderness journey is necessary, though not sufficient, for knowing the God who is God. In spite of what religion would like us to believe for the sake of its survival, there is no fast food faith, no eating and running, no “have it your way” discipleship. Faith in this God is a slog through the desert places, the doubts, the “what” questions and the “why” questions, only to arrive still in a place of no water, no food, and no assurances. A few chapters and many months hence, the rebellion of the Israelites escalates at a place called Massah and Meribah because there they quarreled and tested God. There they asked the question that was behind every *mah* they had ever uttered. There they asked, “Is God in our midst, or not?” “Behind all the screens, the demands for water and food,” Zornberg says, “this is the real need....The profound need of the people is for a center of gravity to contain the zigzags: their volatile reactions to redemption. There have been gifts, miracles, revelations, response to their desires and fears. Equally, there have been times when ‘they could not find water’: times of ‘boredom,’ waiting for something to happen. Knowing God only as bestower of gifts, worker of wonders, the people have seen miracles, and they have believed.” Yet they have also known the absence, the silence, the hiddenness of the God who is God. At the center of human history and in the center of our lives, is the Lord among us, or not?

The question sends us finally to the sixth chapter of John. There a crowd seems almost frantic as they search for the man Jesus who, with only five loaves of bread at his disposal, had fed five thousand of them on the mountain the night before. For all the obvious reasons, they do not want to be without him. When they find him on the other side of the sea, they say to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” It is a complaint, of sorts: *Mah?* What are you doing here without us? Why did you leave us alone? Sensing that they are after him because of their stomachs, Jesus reveals their real hunger, their hunger for a life with the God who is God. “Do

not work for the food that perishes,” he tells them, “but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” What he will give is himself. *Mah*. Manna. The bread come down from heaven. In him, God is among them. The future for which they have longed has come to them, has come to us.

In his life, death and resurrection, God has freed you from the deathly powers that would possess your life and has led you into this present wilderness where, with nothing but complaints on your lips and in the presence of your enemies all around, he has set a table for you, saying, “I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never hunger; the one who believes in me will never thirst; the one who comes to me, I will in no way cast out.” The body of Christ, the bread of heaven, is among us. Thanks be to God.