

September 27, 2009; Proper 21b
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Ps 87
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Rev. Deborah Meister

“Our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Num 11:6)

When I was in graduate school, my friend Jen and I were awarded living stipends in the princely amount of \$1000/month. Now, this was Los Angeles, and \$1000 a month didn't go that far in that city. The university provided my health coverage, and I was able to earn some money over the summer, so, after rent and car insurance, and setting aside some money for birthday and Christmas presents for my family, I had about \$335/month to cover gas, food, clothing, textbooks, entertainment, and travel to see my family on the other coast. In my case, things were complicated because I had become a Christian, and I thought it was my duty to tithe. So, each month \$100 went off to the church, leaving me with about \$50 dollars a week. My friend Jen's predicament was more extreme, as she was also supporting her boyfriend, who was attending graduate school -- without scholarships -- in another state. Jen became adept at eating for nothing; she used wait until those Near East rice mixes went on sale for 75 cents a box, then cook them and cut them by half with unflavored rice, which let her have a week's worth of lunches for about a dollar.

Now, most of the time, we were really genial about this. After all, we were young, we were getting to study what we loved, and people were actually paying us to do it! We were privileged, not poor, we convinced ourselves -- and, besides, it was kind of a challenge to figure out creative ways to make this work. But some days, it got to us: the constant worry, not being able to eat out much or buy clothing, not being able to give the kind of gifts we wanted to. On one of those days, Jen and I headed to the Pedestrian Mall in Santa Monica, where, for the price of an iced coffee, we could have a morning's entertainment people-watching -- and Los Angeles has some *good* people-watching! As we were walking up and down past a life-sized topiary of a brontosaurus, we passed a busker playing his guitar, and, without thinking about it, each of us threw a dollar in his case. Then, suddenly, we turned to each other, and we were both grinning like kids on Christmas. A sudden joy was welling up in my heart, a lightness, a freedom from care -- and I looked at Jen, and I could see that she felt it too. And she put it into words, saying: “I may be eating 20-cent lunches, but I can still give a dollar to a busker!” And it was true. In that small act of giving, our dignity had been restored. We were no longer poor in our own eyes; we were rich; we could be generous; we had something to give; we could help another human being. It was a kind of manna, the kind of bread that comes when you have exhausted your own endurance and strengthens you for years to come.

We could all use some of that manna, these days. Today's scriptures are about exhaustion. They are about what happens to you when you leave your familiar world behind, or it falls apart around you, and you'd give just about anything to return to the comfort you used to know. They are about the times we are salted with fire.

If you grow up in colonial Virginia, where I grew up, you spend a lot of time touring the homes of the founding fathers and mothers of our nation. It's the cheap, family-friendly thing to do. Behind each of those houses -- plain or fancy as they may be -- is a constellation of out-houses: the smithy, the smoke-house, the larder. They are the relics of a world without supermarkets, a world in which, if you wanted to survive, each farm had to be able to replicate most of the functions of Home Depot. The smithy and the smoke-house were the places where the power of fire was harnessed to meet the needs of humankind. The smith forged iron into the tools of everyday existence, repeatedly exposing the metal to fire until it glowed with its own internal fire, became malleable, useful, capable of being shaped to sustain human need. The smokehouse was the place where meats were salted, hung on hooks, and preserved over fire, then moved to the larder to be

stored against the harsh winter cold. Salt and fire were the preservatives of the world, the safeguards of human life.

And so, when Christ says we will be salted with fire, he is saying we will be preserved, but at a cost. For fire is the element which burns away everything in us that cannot endure for eternity. We will be preserved in the very act of paring away everything that might destroy our soul. "If your hand causes you to stumble," Christ says, "cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell." (Mark 9:43-45) These are strong words, frightening words. I hope you have not heard them so often that you can no longer hear them. They sound like the words of a maniac -- or of a surgeon. If you spend much time around doctors, you know there are times when the ill-health of one limb has the potential to kill the whole person. When gangrene sets in, when aggressive forms of cancer appear, you sacrifice the limb to save the life. What would have been unthinkable three days earlier becomes sane, acceptable, even a light sentence. The loss means life. When a severe burn or a bad wound has happened, doctors -- even today-- apply maggots. It's a disgusting concept, but the maggots eat away the rotting flesh so that healthy, new flesh can begin to grow.

In times of trial, we are given eyes to see what is crippling us, and what is killing us, and what will give us life. Often, astonishingly often, we find that what we need is not more, but less: less stress, less stuff to maintain, fewer demands on our attention. Like Mary of Bethany sitting at the feet of the Lord, we find that we are suddenly willing to sacrifice things which had seemed necessary in order to attain the One True Thing that sets our heart ablaze. We look around, and we realize that our offending limb is behind us, and we're not even aware of having made the choice.

For me, this year, I have found that the thing which needs to go is a portion of my salary. Some of you may be aware that the Diocese has decided that clergy will get no increase in salary this year. I have to say, I do not think this is adequate. So many of you have faced furloughs, so many have lost jobs, that I do not believe it is right that I should stand here in the name of a God who chose to live among his people as one of them, and yet remain insulated from the losses you have endured. I have decided to take a voluntary pay cut of ten percent this year by increasing my pledge to this church from ten percent of my pre-tax salary to twenty. I am aware as I say this that being able to do this is an act of luxury: I have been able to choose the amount of my cut, which many of you have not. I have been able to choose to give it as a gift, which preserves my dignity in a way that having a cut imposed does not. But I hope that it will, at least, correct an imbalance in which I would have been able to preserve my lifestyle, while many of you could not. I am deeply humbled that none of you have asked it of me.

I am letting you know of my decision because we are at the start of stewardship season, when we ask you to support this church, and I think it is important for you to know that we are not asking you to share your reduced income so that anyone here can live high on the hog. We are all in this together. That's what it means to be the people of God.

The truth in today's lessons, the truth in so many stories from Scripture, is that the place we reach the end of our endurance is the place we begin to touch the life of God. When the Hebrews are crying in the wilderness, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing" -- nothing but the cost of their enslaved lives! -- "the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now our strength is used up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num 11:4-6), when the Hebrews are crying in the wilderness so badly that Moses' soul becomes embittered and he wants only to die, when the people are out of resources and their leader out of patience, that is the point when the Holy Spirit runs through the people of God like fire. The Lord says to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of the Israel...; I will come down and talk with you..., and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and

they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.” (Num 11:16-17) And the spirit came down on them like wildfire, until not just Moses, but all the leaders were ablaze with the fire of God.

But two men, Eldad and Medad, were so utterly uninterested in God that they did not even bother to show up. While the other sixty-eight got out of bed and went to church, they just sat around in their pajamas at home. *And it didn't matter.* It didn't matter. For the fire of God was so strong, the love of God was so intense, that even those souls who had been indifferent began to speak the words of God. Even those who had been discouraged, even those who had been rebellious, were set afire with the power of God. And when it caused scandal, when Moses' own assistant the future leader of Israel, calls out to Moses, “My lord,..stop them!” (just as Jesus' disciples ask him to stop the outsiders who are acting in his name), Moses only laughs. For he knows that this time of pruning, this time of discouragement, even this act of rebellion, is start of the *true* plan of God, when the purifying fire of the spirit of God, the renewing fire of the grace of God, would fall, not just on one, not just on seventy, but on every man, woman, and child of all the people of God, when it would fan out from one corner of the earth to another, and make of this world a living flame of love. “Would that all the Lord's people were prophets,” he cries, “and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Num 11:29)

“I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets,” he cries out, and from that moment, the cry has never quite ceased. Joel said it, speaking in the midst of famine and scarcity: “I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter...You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame...I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” (Joel 2:25-26, 28-29)

Isaiah spoke it, crying out, “I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.” (Is 61:8-9)

Amos spoke it, crying out of the world that was laboring to be born, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Christ himself said it, gathered with his disciples around the last meal he would taste in this life: “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.” (John 14:26)

And what is this teaching? What is this spirit? What is this fire that is to set the world ablaze? Only this: that just as God did not withhold from us his only Son, his very being, his one most precious thing, so we should not hoard what is precious to us and hold it back from one another. If the artist refuses to show her paintings to those who cannot pay, the poor will see no beauty made by human hands. If the newlyweds hold a huge wedding but make no offering to feed the poor, their joy is dust in the mouths of those who cannot share it. This is a year in which many of our members are working for lower salaries. For them, even to keep their pledges level will be to give a higher percentage of their income. If our members who have enough are not willing to give more this year to make up for their difficulties, this church will no longer be able to live into the witness of Christ.

Make no mistake: if the church becomes a place in which the poor give much so that the rich can take it and flourish, if the church becomes a place where those who have enough keep themselves safe while the wolves of drugs and gangs and violence snatch the hungry children from our door, if we prize safety above all and comfort more than one another, we will have no witness to

offer -- NO witness -- that is different from the witness of Wall Street. We will have become a nice club with good music and fine aesthetics, but we will no longer have any claim to be the church. We will have lost the spirit of God, the very spirit God is trying to pour out upon us.

There's a funny thing about the manna of God. When the Hebrews left the wilderness and entered into the Promised Land, on that day, on that very day, the manna vanished. The people ate, once again, not the food of heaven, but melons and cucumbers and meat, the ordinary food of earth. In ordinary times, such food is enough. But before they crossed over, the Hebrews took some manna and put it in a jar and placed it in the Ark of the Lord. And all the time of their prosperity, it waited there, in the heart of the Temple, waiting until the people would need it again, reminding them of the time they had been fed by God alone.

These are hard times. Hard times call for greatness of soul. Phillips Brooks, the great 19th century leader of our church, said, "Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be the miracle." If we walk through this time faithfully, as people of faith, if we take the daring risk of generosity, let go of the trapeze and trust that God will catch us, we will emerge a changed people: more gentle, more kind, more humble, more loving, more human in the way that Christ was human. We will find that this bread of affliction we disdained, this time of adversity we sought to escape, was nothing less than the manna of God, and that God fed our souls in it all along. Amen.