

Bread For Your Journey  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-11, 24-29  
John 6:25-34

East Liberty Presbyterian Church  
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If we strive to stand firm in our struggles, we will experience the help of God and keep our soul in peace.-- Thomas A Kempis

PRAYER Still any voice in us but your own, God, that in your Word we might hear your Spirit and gain life from it. Amen.

#### SERMON

When you think of the book of *Numbers* in the OT, think of three things:

- 1) Journey, a real and a spiritual journey, toward freedom from all that enslaves you, going to a good place—a journey.
- 2) Think of your provisions coming from God; money either isn't there or it won't do it;
- 3) And think of identity formation: Numbers is about who the Israelites are and who they might become and who is Moses. What kind of leader is he? What gifts of God are in him? Of what kind of stuff is he made?

Now, today in Numbers 11, it doesn't look too good. This is not the easy day. This is the trying one – when faith and character are tested. Have you had one lately? The job; the family; the committee; the deal going down...

On this stretch of the journey through the wilderness to a land of great promise, they are all losing it: the parents, in this case, *Moses* and *God*, and the children. All of the children of Israel are crying, they have retreated to their tents, complaining, not for its good reason, to make things better, but to murmur and grumble, to dream, but backwards, not forward, reverting to old days, not progressing, but returning to old days that were not better. No. The cucumbers, leeks, garlic, melons and fish were far from free. They were slaves in Egypt! But today, the children of Israel want meat. The text says God was angry and Moses was displeased.

Do you know this place?-- where you pull over the car to set the record straight, vent to God, stop and deal with something hard to get back on track and move forward again?

God's gift of wilderness bread, called *manna*, is not what they want. Though in Hebrew, the word *manna*, means literally, *What is this?*-- it is reported to have been tasty. Manna was a flaky substance common in the Sinai Peninsula, falling every morning, like dew; never failing, like God's provisions. But they don't want it.

For one thing, they are tired of it. You know how it is: say your prayers, go to church, eat your greens, here's your manna.

For another thing, it didn't seem like much. It was not high in carbs; it was not your physically strength-training, high calorie food.

But it was food for the time when you find yourself in desert of your life, trying to find your way to a better day. You may not like it, but it is there to move you forward well. Bread for your journey. Eat it. But right now, the children want meat.

God is not happy, so, what does God do? Now you have to have a sense of humor here, because the text does; because God is going to send in quail on the next wind; so many quail they will soon be complaining about all the quail. They will come to hate meat. It is like a harvest of tomatoes and zucchini so great that you can't eat them all, make any more sauce or relish, or find enough people to take them away for you.

And what does Moses do? He speaks an honest prayer. He throws up his hands, *not* where the people see him doing this, but to God. And we get to hear God and Moses in a meeting. And Moses lets it rip:

*Lord, Why are you treating me, your servant, so badly? Haven't I been good?*

*They want meat in the desert! Where will I get this meat?*

*Lord, these are not my kids; they are yours! Why have you brought me to this place?*

Now, I hate it when I talk like this: self-pity. Why me. This can't be where God wants me.

But this talk with God helps Moses get clear, unload, if you will, and see his way forward. And, God sends help! God says, *Gather 70 elders plus two more, Eldad and Medad-- I will put some of my spirit on them, and you will not bear the burden alone.*

What I want to know first here is: who put these names on the baby-names-list in ancient Israel? Eldad? Medad? But I digress. The prayers, the bread, the help – sounds like the Church, doesn't it? The Church is given to the world to be help on our journey.

I tell you all of this because no matter what kind of good work you do, what cause you have taken up, what is on your plate, or has fallen off of it, we will find ourselves here at some time –

trying to lift that calling off the ground, trying to hold up under the weight, move forward. Sometimes we find ourselves stuck, stalled, stopped, confused, upset, complaining, thinking we can't get through, the future is not clear, the work is too much, the dream of God is too big. How many times could you just drop your load and walk away?--except for the blessing in it.

I know a man who wanted to quit on the school that his church is funding in the part of Pittsburgh for the *most least likely to succeed*. The conflicts, the money issues, the low success rate of the children so far. Except that he knows this is the fruit of his best and highest labors.

I know a woman who says some days she could kick her husband out and send the kids to Timbucto, except that the marriage and the kids mean too much. I know a man who thinks of being free, except that he knows what he holds is the light of his life.

Maybe *God's provision* is more hands to lighten the load and more good-spirited people to surround you, to deal with the whining days, someone to walk and talk with you, laugh and cry with you, someone to help you keep the vision, continue the walk, keep your soul in peace.

Although, *there is* the mother who asked her son for help. Some guests came over for dinner and the mother said, *Johnny, why don't you pray before we eat together.*

At first Johnny said, *No. I don't know how.*

His mother encouraged him, *Yes, you do. Just say what I've been saying.*

OK. Johnny prayed: *Dear God, what were we thinking when we invited these people over.* Sometimes the help isn't going to be all you had in mind!

This text helps because all of you have some calling on your life, something hard and high to hold, you all know --or if you live long enough you *will know*, some desert time. And always, at these times most of all, you find out how God provides—you will learn what is the essence of life, what is the strength of your life, what is light for your way, what really holds up when things fall apart.

That is why Jesus said, in John 6, after feeding 5,000 in the wilderness of Galilee, who came to hear him speak, and then they got hungry. And he fed them bread. And then they followed this one, and found him again; because they were hungry for more of what he had to give them, for what fills them, body mind and spirit. Jesus told them: *Don't work for the bread that perishes, but for the bread that endures for life, which the Son of man will give you, if you will have it.*

*It was not Moses who gave you the bread from God that gives life to the world, that makes you hunger no more-- I am the bread of life. I am what you want.*

*Sir, the people said, Give us this bread always.*

How is Jesus Christ the bread of the life for the world? It is difficult to describe bread for the world, bread for the journey, for the life that endures. An artist, Richard Holdman, and a photographer, his brother, Floyd, help us to think about this in a video they produced on You Tube. *An Interview with God, they call it.* It's been viewed by millions; passed around the world everywhere, to help many more through desert times. (vimeo.com, 2010)

There is beautiful music, and scenes of ice-capped mountains, sunflowers, the words appear: I imagined I had an interview with God.

*So you would like to interview me? If you have the time, I My time is eternity. What*

*questions do you have for me.* A flute, a piano, and two white lilies open on the screen:

*What surprises you most about humankind?* God answered: that they get bored with

childhood and grow up, and then long to be children again; that they lose their health to make money and then lose their money to restore their health.

Trees appear: gold, greens, reds:

That by thinking anxiously about the future, they forget the present, such that they live in neither the present nor the future. Then a clear sky at dusk, with a wispy full moon:

That they live as though they will never die and die as though they never lived.

The Grand Canyon, with water around the rock formations

God's hand took mine and we were silent for a while.

Then I asked, *As a parent, what are some lessons you want your children to learn?* God replied with a smile. To learn that

it is not good to compare themselves with others;

that they cannot make anyone love them; what they can do is let themselves be loved;

that a rich person is not the one who has the most, but the one who needs the least.

Cuplike flowers hanging down and dripping in morning dew:

that it only takes a few minutes to open profound wounds in a person, but it takes years to heal them.

to learn to forgive by practicing forgiveness; to learn that they be forgiven by others, but they must forgive themselves; to learn that there are persons who love them dearly, but do not know how to show their feelings;

that two people can look at the same thing and see it differently.

Finally, Bryce Canyon, near Moab, Utah, and Sunbeams:

*Thank you for your time*, I said humbly.

*Is there anything else you would like your children to know?*

That I am here, always –[to save you].

So, ask always for the bread of life. Hide your life in God. Rest your bones in God. Hope in God. Pray for help when you need it, for God's Spirit in you and in the people around for the wisdom from above that you know from your daily feeding of Jesus Christ, for every wilderness time you have, for every decision you make, for everything you say, and in all that I do. May God provide for you always. Amen.