

When I was a little kid, I assumed that when you got really, really old (like thirty or so) that you'd be all grown up. By "grown up" I meant you'd pretty much have it all figured out: you'd not only know the answers to all the really hard math questions and be able to understand all the words in any book, but much more than that, you'd understand why the sky was blue and the grass was green and where pets go when they die and why there is so much suffering in the world.

Thirty came and went a long time ago. *Adulthood is not what I once believed it would be.* I had thought it was a destination, but what I've discovered is that life is a journey, and that when we get stressed and confused or upset or feel betrayed we revert back to somewhere in our childhoods. We never grow up, at least not in the ways I used to believe—not in the sense that we "arrive" and can check it off some list.

Maybe the truth is that wisdom comes when we begin to recognize this. I remember when I first put together the confirmation program, basically the same program that we continue to use here at St. Francis, when I was a young curate in Westport, Connecticut. At that point, instead of doing one-on-one interviews with "saints," we brought in a panel of saints to meet with all the kids at once. One of those saints was Helen Gault, a wonderful old Yankee woman in her late eighties who told the kids that she thought by now she'd have this faith thing figured out but the truth is that the older you get the more questions and uncertainties you have. I loved that, and the kids did too, I think.

The journey from slavery to freedom runs along a similar trajectory to this journey from childhood to adulthood. It is a meandering road through the wilderness, and it makes its gains in fits and starts. Sometimes you start to move forward a few steps, only to revert back again to the old patterns. So when we left the Israelites last weekend they were by the Red Sea singing and doing liturgical dance and shaking their tambourines. They were happy, because they had seen that God is good, that God cared about their plight, that God could do infinitely more than they could ask or imagine. But the liturgy has ended and they look up and there is the Sinai Desert in front of them. We skipped verse one today but it gives us a timeline: only one month has passed since their singing and dancing. The Bible says they will spend forty years in Sinai which means they only have 479 more months to go.

Stop and think about where you were forty years ago. I was a kindergarten student at John Greenleaf Whittier Elementary School in Scranton, Pennsylvania, just learning, I suppose, to read—and thinking that thirty year olds had all the answers. Now stop and think about the other direction: where will you be forty years from now? Some of us will be with the saints triumphant, our ashes perhaps interred in that beautiful garden. People will remember us as we remember people like Helen Gault or Margaret Herbert or Midge Chrystoff or David Haynes. If I make it that long I'll be eighty-five years old: about the same age Helen Gault was when I was a young (did I say good-looking?) curate in Westport, Connecticut. Maybe I'll come in and talk with a confirmation class and tell them I haven't figured it all out yet, that I still have many questions, that I'm still on the journey to try to find my way to the Promised Land, still on the journey to adulthood.

We spend our lives somewhere between slavery and freedom, somewhere between childhood and maturity. And when the stress level goes up we start to become fearful, or nostalgic, or sometimes a combination of both. We start to think that slavery wasn't that bad or being a teenager was easy. But even if our memories were not so skewed, the fact is that you can't go back even if you want to.

There is only ever Now: we don't get a re-do on the past and we cannot control the future. So the only real question before us, each step of the journey, is to try to live this moment fully, with trust rather than fear.

It's like that song by "Five for Fighting," which I admit may be a bit cheesy but I also have to admit I really like the message a lot, because I think it does convey a deep wisdom: even if you've only got a hundred years to live, you get to be fifteen just for a moment, twenty-two for a moment, 33, 45, 67, 99...

So the point, I think, of this text today is that you can't go back to slavery even if in your anxiety you start to believe it was easier than this wilderness journey, and you can't beam yourself forward 479 months in time either. You have to learn to be where you are, in this case the Sinai Desert. And the Bible is ridiculously honest about the fact that we spend a fair amount of time in our lives in such transitions, or to use that Biblical metaphor, "in the wilderness."

Think about it: the Torah—those first five books of the Bible—are the heart of Jewish faith and by extension pretty important for Christians as well. From this point on until the last verses of Deuteronomy, we'll be in the wilderness. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: *four/fifths* of the Torah takes place "in the wilderness!" In the New Testament, Jesus will recall this ancient metaphor when, after his baptism, he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days and nights. Our season of Lent is an opportunity for us to do the same.

But the wilderness is also the place where gifts are given and where spiritual growth occurs. I suspect that the Israelites imagined what freedom would be like in much the same way that, as a child, I imagined adulthood would be like. That it would just happen. But it doesn't work that way. It's a long and winding road toward freedom. Part of the key is learning to live one day at a time, trusting in God for daily bread—learning to be fully present to the moment.

So what is the point of this text set before us today? The passage is, I want to suggest, hilariously funny if we are willing to hear it that way. Everyone is complaining and quite frankly behaving very badly. Hunger will do that to you. This is the original *Survivor*, only no one is going to get voted off the island. They are in this together; that is perhaps the single most important lesson they need to learn in this journey from slavery toward freedom: their utter dependence upon God and their radical interdependence with one another. They need to figure out how to become a community together.

Their memories of slavery are becoming skewed: they remember the good parts, that they had food from their master's table. At least they had enough to eat. So the Lord tells Moses, "I'm going to rain down bread from heaven for them." And Moses passes the message along: God will rain down bread from heaven for you.

Great! I'm sure they are thinking about some rye toast, maybe a nice whole grain batard, a sourdough baguette...right? Hungry people talk about food; just hang around here when the youth are doing the Thirty Hour Famine. Words like "pizza" and "cheeseburger" make you crazy. So they are thinking about warm crusty bread, I'm sure. And then this:

... in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness 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?" *For they did not know what it was.* Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

What is *that*? The Bedouin to this day use the same word, "manna," to speak of the excretions made when scale insects and plant lice ingest the sap of the tamarisk trees—they excrete it onto the trees where it crystallizes and falls to the ground. So technically speaking now, Moses could have answered the question "what is it?" by saying, "well, it's lice excrement!"

Yum! I'm usually the first in line where there is food but I think I'll wait and see whether or not Mikey likes this stuff! There's also an explanation, by the way, for the quail which do not come daily but only to add variety to the diet: during the seasons of migration from Africa to Europe and from Europe to Africa, quail sometimes drop from the sky exhausted over the Sinai Desert. What does quail taste like, you are wondering; the answer is that it tastes just like chicken!

Now does knowing this take away from the miracle or add to it? An atheist might argue that an exhausted quail flying over the desert and lice excrement on the ground have nothing to do with God: they have normal, everyday explanations. Sometimes believers want to counter that argument by insisting on more than this text says: as if God is shooting those quail down or raining down loaves of crusty bread. If we are looking for the "little red hen" God who will gather the manna and knead it and bake it for us we may well miss the miracles of life that are right before our very eyes. So I think the degree of normalcy in this miracle is what makes it so terrific. *What is that stuff?* Well, Moses says, it's good enough to eat. It's the key to our survival. It's the daily bread God promised and the daily part is emphasized. There will be *enough* for everyone if we share it and work together.

In *Pharaoh's* economy there were those who have more than enough and those who had less than they need. In *God's* economy, the first step is to learn to trust God that we will get what we need. We may not always get what we want, or what we think we deserve or what we think we have earned: but you get what you need. That manna rains down from heaven just as surely as all of God's good gifts are given. What greater miracle is there, by the way, than a vine-ripe tomato or a beautiful acorn squash or an oven-roasted potato? God is the giver of all good gifts—when we feel settled and secure and when we feel vulnerable and uncertain. We just need eyes to see and ears to hear.

What is that stuff? *It's bread*, Moses tells them. *It is one of the keys to your survival for the next 479 months, so get used to it and receive it as a gift and give thanks to God.* It will be harder still in the Promised Land to remember that truth—where it's easier to say "I hate rye bread;" I only like wonder bread with the crusts cut off. It's hard to remember that truth when we think our neighbor's car or house or spouse is better than ours. Envy corrodes community. But the point of the manna is to put your trust in God and be grateful for what you have. Learn that it is enough—more than enough to go on. And so God's people continue to pray, as we journey toward adulthood, as we journey toward freedom: *Give us this day our daily bread...*