

Fourth Sunday in Lent – 2024
Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

We loathe this worthless food. God didn't take too kindly to the Israelites critiquing His provision. God gave this ungrateful people bread from heaven and they wanted something else. There's not much to eat in the desert. God provided manna, a miraculous food, and the recipients of this gift turned their nose up at it and berated the Giver. "And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we loathe this worthless food'" (Nu. 21:5).

What was the divine response? Death was the response. Fiery serpents, a fatal snakebite, and a real good look at death; it's a pretty memorable lesson, wouldn't you say? Manna; it means "what is it?" The Israelites didn't know what it was that God had given them, so that's what they named it. Manna; "He rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance" (Psalm 78:24-25). Glorious food of grace and the people despised it. Did God alter His menu? Did God enable their craving for foreign food? Did God capitulate and offer an alternative substance with which to feed His rebellious people? No; He brought them death. After taking a good look at death, suddenly the children of Israel had a change of heart. "And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us'" (Numbers 21:7).

Seems like a pretty harsh lesson over just some food. Do you know what Jesus called Himself? Jesus called Himself the bread of life (John 6:48). The Lord Christ was adamant about being the sole hope for your salvation. He said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Has God provided multiple Messiahs? If Christianity doesn't appeal to your sensibilities, does God alter His plan of salvation? Do you know how Christianity defines idolatry? Turning anything into a god that is not God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; that's idolatry. Spurning God's grace and then looking for some alternative to feed that yearning in your heart for the transcendent; that's idolatry. Can you reject God's Son and then expect mercy from the Almighty delivered to you in some other way? Do you think that God the Father is serious about you not rejecting His crucified and beloved Son? Listen to this line from the book of Hebrews: "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:29).

Put these two things together in your mind for they are surely together in God's mind: "We loathe this worthless food." "We loathe this worthless Christ." This is the God who gave His Son up to the brutality of ruthless men. This is the God who called upon His Son to give everything that He had in order to redeem the world. This is the God who watched as His majestic Son laid down His life, in fidelity to Him, in love for the fallen, and your sin, in Jesus, was punished and that Savior took it. And the Father is supremely proud of His Son. The Father knows what the sacrifice took, what it cost, and when people spurn His Son is God just gonna let

it slide and come up with some other way for people to receive His grace, some other way to enter His realm, His kingdom, His heaven?

“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” (John 6:48-51). That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? You’re here because Jesus is the bread of life. You have come to know the power, the wonder, and the beauty of God’s grace. You know that you are incapable of generating a personal righteousness that would satisfy God’s demands. Like me, you fail. You covet and you lust and you malign your neighbor in thought, word and deed. The first commandment, you have not kept it. You shall have no other gods. If you can keep the first commandment you can keep them all. But you fail. Sin is in you like the poison of a fiery serpent. Sin brings death. Every human being fails and every human being needs God’s grace and it is all located in one person, only one person. Spurn Him and you are out of options. The Israelites rejecting God’s food was tantamount to them rejecting His Son. That’s why God sent the fiery serpents.

Repent; that’s what God was telling them. I won’t feed you with any other bread except manna because I will not give you another instrument for salvation besides my Son. Take a good look at death. Jesus is your reprieve. Jesus is your innocent substitute. Jesus takes your death and gives you His life. “God loved the world in this way, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus didn’t come as a fiery serpent, to judge the world and usher in a kingdom of fear. “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:17-18).

The people of Israel did repent. They cried out in earnest for God to save them. And that’s precisely what He did. Make a serpent and set it up on a pole. Whenever anyone is bit, they can look at the serpent on the pole and live (Numbers 21:8). Do you think that God had His Son and His cross in mind when He told Moses to make a serpent and put it on a pole? Jesus was lifted up, high and exalted, and you look to Him there, don’t you? You know that there is no other way for you to be healed of your sin than by His atoning death and the marvel of His resurrection. Eternal life; Jesus said that those who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Do you believe that that starts now? Christ’s life is given to you now, right? You eat His body. You drink His blood. He is the bread of life. He is the way, the truth and the life. What kind of life? A life that is not subject to death. He defeated death. Death has no dominion over Him. Death has no dominion over us. Jesus life is love in action. That love is in you.

Fear, love and trust in God above all things; that’s life. Loving God above all things and loving your neighbor as yourself; that’s life. That is the life that you get to live now, on this earth, among the children of God, in your vocation, surrounded by sinners, people whom God has given you to love and to bless and to serve. And that life comes to you through people God has given to you, a sinner, that you might be loved, and be blessed, and be served. The good works that God prepared in advance for you to walk in; that’s life (Ephesians 2:10). Feast now. Feast on life. The bread of Christ’s body and the wine of His blood is on Christ the King’s menu. He

gives us a banquet of His grace, a feast of forgiveness, a sacrament of life. We treasure this astounding food.