

Are We There Yet?

Very truly, I tell you...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Jn 6:33

Our family is considering another attempt to travel to Armenia this Summer, and the one thing we are dreading is the 24 hours of planes and layovers. Daddy my shoe fell off. Momma, I'm hungry! He's bothering me. Are we there yet? When can we go back home? That's how it sounds in our car when we drive to Orlando; what will it be like on our transcontinental journey? Sharing our concerns with you already helps me feel better. But I also find some comfort in today's Gospel reading, which reveals that complaints on a long journey is an issue with very deep roots.

The journey Jesus references today is course the journey of the Israelites, the Exodus of a people recently freed from slavery in Egypt. And the soundtrack is similar to kids in a car: We're hot. We're hungry! Are we there yet? Can we go back home now? In other words, the Israelites-like kids on a long journey-are anxious about what lies ahead and are whiny. But of course in the Bible, a trip is not just a trip and the story of God's people is also our own story.

You see the Israelites were so anxious on their journey, not just because they were travelling someplace new, but because they were being called to become something new; to leave off everything they'd known and make a leap to follow God. Until recently, the Jews were slaves in Egypt. Without dignity, without self-determination, they cried out to God. God heard their prayers and brought them out of slavery to freedom. But here is the surprising insight: the Hebrew people actually have to learn to be free, and they are finding it very hard to let go of the past and let God lead them forward.

That's what is behind all the complaining. They know how to be told what to do and how to resist and complain. Now they have to learn a new skill. They have to open their heads and hearts to trust-in each other and in God. Yes they have every reason to complain about their past victimization, but now they are free. Can they learn to live forward with trust, instead of backward in fear?

I think we all can identify with the difficulty of breaking free from the grip of a difficult past, or a bad habit-or even just mediocrity-in order to move forward in faith to something better. And I think many Armenians can especially identify with this struggle. Many of our families escaped the Genocide, but that does not mean that the Genocide escaped us. Our people were taught a certain fatalism for generations. Try as we might

to make the system better, for the most part we remained second class citizens. Fully engaging in the greater society was dangerous or impossible, so we learned to be tribal and inward looking. But most of all-and this is not specific to Armenians but simply human-complaining is so much easier than the hard work and trust needed for positive change!

Well God has a cure for his people then and now. He has a cure for me and you to quit our complaining and learn the new skill of trusting in each other and in God. Jesus talks about this cure in today's reading, it is called *manna*. It is quite mysterious; the name literally means 'what is this'? You see to feed the people in the wilderness, God made this flaky manna appear on the ground every morning. In this way, Manna is more than food, it is a sign and sacrament; training for the things of God. And it has amazing properties. You can't earn it. It appears overnight out of nowhere, a pure gift of God. You can't commodify it. The people have to collect manna together each day, and there's exactly enough to go around. If you hoard it, it rots. If you don't collect it, you will be hungry.

Manna is the sacrament of trust, and trust in God, trust in each other takes practice. Especially for individuals and peoples whose trust has been so often let down. The trials of life tempt us to be fiercely self-reliant and not depend on anyone for anything. They whisper to us that the worst can happen, so we must hoard our possessions to feel secure. They try to convince us that leaders and institutions are all corrupt, so just look out for yourselves. Living with this attitude might make us secure, but it certainly won't make us happy. Somehow the lesson of our past struggles is not to turn inward, but instead to double down on trusting God and relying on each other, not only for our daily bread but for the deepest desires of our heart; to love and be loved, to help and be helped, to lead and to serve.

That's what the disciples find in Jesus at the end of today's reading. In Jesus, God personalizes his gift of manna from heaven. Jesus is revealed as 'the bread of life.' He doesn't just fill physical hunger, His presence is a source of comfort and strength in any situation, in plenty and in want, in easy times and in hard. Even in the midst of a desert. Even after Genocide. Even during pandemic or war. Even when we don't know where we are going, the trip is long and we feel like turning around. It is just then that Jesus offers himself as sustenance for our bodies and our souls, promising that 'he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst,' now and always; amen.