

The Day the Manna Ceased
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; Joshua 5:9-12
Lent 4

Joshua 5:9-12

⁹The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’ ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷

He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The Sermon

In a field, under the sun, emaciated with hunger, looking after pigs; he was spattered with filth, he was tired, thirsty, and malnourished. Muscles searing, eyes stinging, the soles of his feet screaming for rest; and dominating every moment, every tortured breath, the feeling in his empty stomach was a constant, cavernous ache.

Before coming out to this seemingly God-forsaken country, he had asked for, and received, everything that he would ever be given; it was a small fortune, and once he’d taken it, he had squandered everything.

He watched his bank account dwindle down toward zero and never changed his expression. It was hard for him to feel panicky about it, because he didn't know how: he had come from unmitigated prosperity. There was always something to fall back on, someone to bail him out of a jam.

He had probably—like his brother—worked the family's extensive property, alongside those who had at some point sold themselves into indentured servitude to the head of the household. But mainly his job was to be an inheritor, which he fulfilled prematurely, cashing in early to go off and spend prodigiously, which is why generations have called him the *prodigal* son.

And so now here he was, sweltering in the unforgiving heat, a thousand miles from what used to be home.

He hadn't come to this distant country to escape persecution.

He hadn't been lured by the hope and promise of being able to sustain a hungry family in a land just across the border from his own.

He wasn't desperately trying to escape certain misery and death in Syria.

He was an inheritor, who jet-setted off to Fiji, or Moscow, or Dubai—someplace where people who have more than they know what to do with spend a ton of money, and you don't ask any questions.

*Put your makeup on, Fix your hair up pretty
And meet me tonight in Atlantic Cityⁱ*

But the money ran out, as it always does when there's nothing coming in and a flood of it going out.

And then, there was a famine.

Somehow he had found a bottom-rung, low-wage, part-time job, working for a citizen of the country he'd run off to. And now here he was: tossing pig food to pigs—pods, *keratia*, “little horns”—husks of the fruit of the carob tree.ⁱⁱ Those pods were used primarily to fatten pigs, but also as food for people who couldn't afford anything better.ⁱⁱⁱ

And look at him now, a shriveled hired hand tossing these pods as slop for hogs. The guy who'd had everything he could dream of at his family's nightly banquet table back home looked at that pig food—the barely digestible husks they gave to the destitute *and he couldn't even have that*—and he thought, man, that looks good right now...

What's edible depends on your circumstances. Some years ago, my middle brother and his brother-in-law hiked the treacherous Hundred Mile Wilderness trail in Maine, and they had taken with them these little pre-packaged somethings that were designed for just such an occasion. This was special-occasion food out there, and they only had it when they had accomplished something major, and oh, but it was good.

Some time after they had returned from that grueling expedition, they were together at one of their homes, and it was late afternoon, and they said, let's bust into some of that stuff that was so good out on the trail.

It was absolutely horrible. They couldn't eat it, it was so disgusting.

When you're out there with practically nothing, and you are physically pushed beyond all your boundaries, and all you ever have day after day is chlorine-treated water and stale noodles, that stuff is *awesome*.

Kind of like manna, I would imagine.

The people of Israel had been following Moses in the wilderness for a few weeks, and their memories of being treated as less than human in Egypt were still fresh—but not as fresh as their clear memories of also having had pretty good food, and all they wanted of it. “Yeah, *philosophically* Egypt was miserable, but at least we had *food*.”

And now they're out there in the wilderness, and although the neologism only dates to 2013, I am sure Moses was listening to a lot of people—and was himself—“hangry,” that is, “a specific form of irrational anger that is felt by a person with low blood sugar who is then more irritable.”^{iv}

(I don't think somebody actually needed to call that an actual word; people have known when they're hangry for a long time.)

So this hangry nation of wanderers, still just learning how to live as nomads, came to the wilderness between Elim and Sinai, about a month and a half after they had left Egypt, and they'd go to Moses and Aaron and go,

“If only we had died in Egypt, where at least we were sitting at the all-you-can-eat buffet; you brought us out here to kill the whole assembly with hunger.”

And God said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people will go out and gather enough for that day. The sixth day of the week, they'll be given twice as much, so they don't have to go gather it on the Sabbath.”

It was called manna, and Barbara Brown Taylor for one has compared it to grits, partly for its appearance, and partly in that—depending on where you're from, I guess—grits are awesome when they're first set on the table, but they don't keep for leftovers. Manna's generally good for about a day, and then you really need to be done with it and get a new portion.

Exodus says the Israelites found it to be “like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.”^v Well, that's what it tasted like out there, anyway.

“The Israelites ate manna forty years,” says Exodus, “until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.”^{vi}

By the time they were on the brink of entering their promised land, Moses had died, and now they looked to Joshua the same way they had looked to Moses.

And one day, when forty years had elapsed,
when Moses had already gone to his reward
(having seen but not been allowed to enter the promised land),
when the generation who still remembered Egypt had died,
and a new generation had been given the sign of the covenant
and was now called to prepare itself
to go in and inhabit the Promised Land,

THE LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have *rolled away* from you the disgrace of Egypt.” The Hebrew word for roll is *galal*, and they named that place Gilgal; and the disgrace of the bondage from which God had rescued the whole people was *rolled away*, like a boulder being rolled away from a tomb.

While they were camped in Gilgal, they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho.

On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

The manna ceased that day, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

That was the day that the manna ceased. After forty long years, they were ready.

Later in Israel’s history, the older prophet Elijah will take his leave of the younger prophet Elisha, and they’ll walk from one town to another, Elijah the whole time saying, “You stay here now, I have to go on,” and Elisha saying, “Let’s just go on to the next town together;” and finally they come to the point where there is no more left of Elijah’s journey;

and it becomes that agonizing time in a human life
when the one departing finally has to say
to the one who cannot bear the thought,
“You have to let me go.”

It was time. Elijah knew that Elisha was ready,
even if Elisha was not able to accept it.

It’s the soul-wrenching, agonizing, tear-wringing moment when parents put their child on the school bus for the first time. “You’re ready.”

The parents are usually the ones who can’t accept that it’s time, or that they’re ready.

You’re ready. You really are, whether you know it or not.

On the day the manna ceased, the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were over. But manna didn't turn into birthday cake, or an Egyptian all-you-can-eat buffet. From that time on, the people worked the land for their food.

It was time for God to stop spoon-feeding them, and on that day, that's what happened.

When the young man in Jesus' story, who had gone to a distant country with all his inheritance, and then found himself envying the food of the pigs, finally "came to himself," he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I'll get up and go to my father, and I'll say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

It was time, and he was ready. He came to himself and realized that no one was going to spoon feed him anymore; his money had been his false security, and with that gone, it was time for him to go home and embrace his real inheritance: the unshakeable, forgiving love of an unconditionally loving parent.

It was time. Nobody was going to provide manna in the morning. Now it was up to him.

Christians, in the continuing meta-narrative of God's involvement in the world through Christ, and in the unfolding story of your life, it is time. We have crossed the midway point of our journey for this Lent; Holy Week will be around the corner soon.

Are you ever pestered by a nagging thought that you don't do enough—maybe don't do anything, really—to help those who are less fortunate than you are? If so, don't wallow in guilt. Recognize that you are ready to go ahead and do more—do something.

You're ready. You don't need to be spoon-fed Jesus' instruction to look after people who are in worse shape than you. Go ahead. You can do it.

Do you find yourself badmouthing, stereotyping, or acting out against other people—and then asking for forgiveness, from God or them—and then doing the same cycle over and over? It's time to get past that.

You're ready. You don't need to be spoon-fed. You know what to do.

Do you hear self-righteous words coming out of your mouth? Do you breathe out threats and murder? Do you do what you know God doesn't want you to do, and not do what you know God wants you to do?

Don't wait for the manna to show up tomorrow morning. You know who you are supposed to be, and you know are capable of discerning what you should be doing about it.

Go on. You're ready. It's time.

One of my favorite sayings that I quote all the time comes from Lorne Michaels, who for more than forty years has been the producer of a show called Saturday Night Live, which since the mid-1970s has been coming on NBC as a live broadcast starting at 11:30 on Saturday nights. And his immortal quote is: "We don't start our show each week because we're ready. We start the show because it's 11:30 Saturday night."

Whether or not we feel like we're ready to take up our cross and follow, the clock doesn't lie.

It's time.

And believe it or not, you are ready.

When I pray, "We thank you, O God,"

I invite you to respond, "You are making all things new."

Prayers of Intercession

God our Provider,

out of your fullness you cause life to spring up in barren landscapes;

you have power to control troubled waters, making a path of safety;

you hear our cries and receive our tears;

you restore us to joy and laughter.

You have done great things for us, O God,

and are continually making all things new.

We thank you, O God:

You are making all things new.

We thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ,
whose life and ministry has guided us through this Lenten season
and guides us in every season of life.
In his suffering and death,
he knows full well the troubles and pains we face in this earthly life.
In his resurrection is the hope of our own.
Surrounded by your overflowing love, we are not alone.
We thank you, O God:
You are making all things new.

With thanksgiving we celebrate your care
and the gift of newness in our lives:
for recovery from illness or injury;
for calm after a time of unrest or turmoil;
for a sense of direction after uncertainty;
for new life;
for new opportunities.
We thank you, O God:
You are making all things new.

We pray for people who wait in difficult places.
For those who are suffering and those at life's end;
for people struggling with employment and financial worries;
for those estranged from loved ones;
for those trapped in the grip of addiction;
for people enduring emotional or spiritual turmoil.
Because you are able to make a way in every wilderness,
we thank you, O God:
You are making all things new.

We pray for the needs of the world.
May peace invade places of war
and justice crowd out oppression and cruelty.
Protect soldiers and citizens from harm's way
and make all conflict cease.
Bless leaders of communities, states, and nations,
that they may speak the truth and work with others for the common good.
Pour out healing on the earth itself,
depleted and injured by our careless consumption and intentional greed.

Comfort those devastated by natural disasters;
strengthen those supplying shelter, food, and aid.
Amid the chaos of this world, your Spirit intercedes
with sighs too deep for words.

We thank you, O God:

You are making all things new.

We pray for the church, the body of Christ in the world,
that we may proclaim your Word boldly.

Lead us, by the power of your Spirit, to witness to your truth,
for we remember and proclaim that death does not have the last word—
in our lives, in the church, or in the world.

We thank you, O God:

You are making all things new!

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Amen.^{vii}

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ⁱ “Atlantic City” lyric by Bruce Springsteen, 1982.

ⁱⁱ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina series, Vol. 3).
Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991; p. 237, n. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the
New Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981; p. 344 (n.
κερατιον).

^{iv} The Rice University Neologisms Database (<http://neologisms.rice.edu>),
retrieved March 5, 2016.

^v Exodus 16:31 (New Revised Standard Version).

^{vi} Exodus 16:35 (New Revised Standard Version).

^{vii} Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press from *Feasting on
the Word® Worship Companion: Liturgies for Year C, Volume 1*, © 2012.