
What is it? Recognizing the Manna of God

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton

The Cathedral of St. Philip, 4 p.m.

Proper 20 A

Exodus 16:2-15

I do not remember the first time I saw one. I certainly do not remember the first time I wore one. No doubt, it is a memory I must have blocked. I do not even remember the first time I came to appreciate its finer qualities. It was not the type of item that inspired loyalty or fidelity. The first reaction was generally despair and horror. It was made of triple knit polyester and it was the required uniform of the Albion College Choir.

Every fall, the upperclassman looked with great delight upon the faces of the freshman as they received their personal garment of shame. With all due respect to the men's tuxes, the women's dresses were the worst. You had the impression that a miracle of dress design had been involved, which served to make all of us look equally horrible. In fact, we took to referring to the dresses as "the black uglies." As I said, it took me a while to see any redeeming quality that might be present.

The black uglies started to prove their worthiness during the spring break of my freshman year. We had all arrived early in the morning to begin the annual choir tour. We would spend the next week on the bus, attending churches throughout the Midwest as we performed in these charming garments. I did discover their main reason for being appeared to be that you simply could not wrinkle them. They could be used as a pillow on the bus one afternoon, and emerge wrinkle free that evening. You could wash them in any temperature with any other colors and it would spring unchanged from the dryer.

Most importantly, as my friends and I laugh about the black uglies to this day, they became an important symbol. Symbols of fellowship, fun, shared memories and deep friendship. What had only been a source of complaint, now was a beloved treasure.

Aside from the black uglies, there was one other main feature of our complaining as we journeyed through the Midwest ensconced on our bus. It was of course the food. Apparently some Albion alum had an inside connection to a chain of family restaurants, named Bill Knapp's. We always ate there. We were given an option each night. Beef or Chicken? The chicken was fried, and the beef was leathery. To hear us on the bus lamenting our fate as we would approach the white clapboarded restaurants, you would imagine we were entering a gulag.

The food of course was not that bad, but there was something to the complaining and mumbling that unified us, gave us a common cause. It never failed to make it into the end of tour skit, and to this day, when someone asks me at a function, beef or chicken? I always think of Bill Knapp's.

The most amusing part of this lament was the way it transformed our view of our college dining facility. Prior to the choir tour, you would have imagined us trapped in slavery, with only gruel to eat. By the end of the tour you would have thought we had left the land of milk and honey behind. Remember the salad bar? Remember entrees that were not fried? Didn't they always have ice cream for dessert? Sigh.

I have to believe that amidst our complaining and murmuring we were not that different than the Israelites. We were really not complaining about the outfits and the food. We were complaining about being in an uncomfortable position where we did not know which end was up. We did not know what each night's host family would bring. We did not know how we would get along by day four, and so we focused on the tangible, and unified ourselves through complaint.

You would have liked to believe that the Israelites would have had a little more staying power. Didn't they just see the Red Sea part and water burst forth from a rock? Haven't they escaped slavery? What do they really have to complain about. And then of course there is God's response. This is the response that every parent who has ever told a child not to whine fears. God gives in to their whining, and feeds them.

What? Really? You have to think in the deep recesses of his mind that Moses was hoping for a little fire or earthquake to shake them up and give them perspective. To give him the opportunity to go through the litany of their graces received. To pummel them with their ingratitude until their only response could be contrition, regret, and a firm commitment to not whining in the future.

But God seems to realize that when you are in the midst of transition, you are not always in a place to have perspective. You may not have a strong enough foothold to realize what burdens you have shed and the grace to find comfort in the new things. It is hard to leave that which is comfortable, especially when we really don't know what the new terrain will bring. We are assured of God's provision, but the Israelites remind us that transformation means admitting we do not know what the new symbols of freedom bring us. What before seemed like triple knit polyester, now is a symbol of unity. What was an enslaved existence, now seems tempting in the midst of a whole new way of life.

But into that confusion comes the abundance and generosity of God. It is the manna that will appear every morning. But do you remember the first thing the Israelites say when they see it? They look at it and say, "What is it?" That is the translation of the word manna. It is stuff we don't recognize and don't know quite what to do with. But Moses knows. He sees beyond the whining and complaining and is the first to glimpse God's grace and abundance. Moses says, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

How often is it that we miss the abundance of God because we do not know quite what we are seeing? As we leave one life for another, how long are we disoriented before we start to see the past and the present in a new way? And when are we willing to be vulnerable enough to ask, "what is it?" To open ourselves to the possibility that something we see as only ugly or useless, is in fact a vehicle for grace. But it is only through that vulnerability that transformation can take place.

I would like to close with a poem entitled appropriately, *Manna* by Yakov Azriel.

MANNA

"The house of Israel named it manna; it was like white coriander seed, and its taste was like wafers in honey." (Exodus 16:13)

When least expected,
The manna
Comes.
Like a burst of lightning in a moonless desert night
Suddenly
Allowing you to see all at once in white
The deep ravines and gaping canyons,
The chiseled walls of protruding boulders,
The strangely sculptured statues of mesas,
The huge cliffs
Surrounding you.

When the manna comes,
You taste
(Instead of the dry rations of stale bread)

The most exquisite varieties of ice-cream
And chocolate-covered pastries
Filled with whipped-cream.

When the manna comes,
You drink
(Instead of a stingy, measured allowance of stagnant water)
Bottles and gallons of fruit juices,
From citrus to mango, from apricot to kiwi.

When the manna comes,
You smell
The fragrance of incense
Enwrapping and enveloping you,
Drifting down from the mountains of myrrh
And the hills of frankincense.

When the manna comes,
You see
A black raven perched on a leafless bush
Transform
Into a phoenix
Whose peacock-colored feathers dazzle,
Unscathed
By the halo of flames
Blazing around her.

When the manna comes,
You hear
The noise of traffic (honking horns, drivers' curses, coughing buses) fade away;
Distant symphonies gradually grow louder and clearer
As chariots of ivory and translucent crystal draw near you,
Their wheels turning
Like gears inside a mother-of-pearl music-box,
Creating crescendos you never heard before:
The music of chariots driven by hosts of angels.
Or are these angels just notes of music:
Semibreves, crotchets, quavers
Somehow come alive?

And when the manna falls, God's fingertips Descend and gently Touch you.*

* Manna, by Yakov Azriel, published in *Cross Currents*, 54, no. 1, Spr 2004, pp. 143-144. 2004.