

### ***The Spirit Rested on Them***

In the name of him out of whose heart flows the living water of the Spirit, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Old Testament lesson takes us to desert where we find Moses and the Children of Israel traveling toward the Promised Land. Only a few months before, they were slaves in Egypt. So they've recently seen the whole thing: how the Lord brought them out with his mighty hand and outstretched arm, visiting ten destructive plagues on their oppressors. They crossed in safety through the parted waters of the Red Sea and saw the walls of water collapse on the chariots of the pursuing Egyptian army, drowning the entire host of them. They've been sustained each day with manna: a kind of bread that miraculously appears every morning. They scoop it up in handfuls from the ground. Likewise, the Lord provides water from supernatural sources whenever it's not otherwise available.

Most recently they camped around the base of Mount Sinai. There they saw and heard tremendous things. The Lord himself came down on the mountain, the bright fullness of his glory veiled in clouds and smoke. They heard his thundering voice giving the Law they were to live by as his people, and they agreed to the terms of the covenant he made with them. And now they are following him as he visibly leads them in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He is taking them to the inheritance he's promised to give them: a wide and spacious land flowing with milk and honey where they will be free and prosperous and content and can live in peace.

Pause for a moment to take that all in. What other people on the planet has ever seen and experienced this sort of thing? Who else has a God who so powerfully and lovingly cares and provides for them? It's absolutely unheard of. And yet here they are: the equivalent of physical and spiritual lottery winners, now (if they remain faithful) just a couple months away from moving into their new homes.

So, how are they processing and receiving all this? What are they doing now? Why, they are complaining, of course. Some of the complaints are about their general discomforts. Hey, it's a desert, after all: the sun is hot, the sand burns our feet, the wind blows grit in our eyes. On top of that, it's a long way to walk, our baggage is heavy, there are no shower facilities, the toilet paper isn't soft enough, we have no ice to keep our beer cold. Oh, it's not to be borne.

But the biggest complaint is about the food the Lord provides. It's always same thing: this stupid, stinking manna. Well, no; it really isn't stupid or stinking. Actually, it has a pleasant, slightly sweet taste; like honey cake. And it's amazingly versatile and nutritious – better than Wonder Bread with its 8 essential vitamins. It's also nearly effortless to obtain. Just think about the amount of labor that went into putting bread on the table under normal circumstances in the ancient world: all the plowing, sowing, reaping, gathering, transporting, threshing, storing, grinding, kneading, baking – and all of it by hand. It was constant work. And that was on top of the work they did as slaves making bricks and building Pharaoh's treasure cities. They did their farming in their spare time. And do you imagine that as slaves on the bottom of the social and economic pyramid that they ate very well? Fat chance. What they knew was constant hunger. Many days they didn't eat at all. And when they did eat, there was never enough for anyone to feel satisfied. No, they went to bed every night with a gnawing emptiness in their stomachs,

hearing their children cry for bread they didn't have. Now, for the first time in their lives they are able to eat three meals a day, as much as they want, with almost no work involved other than to bend over and pick it up.

No matter. It is, in their telling, sheer torture; torture, do you hear? Oh why, oh why, didn't the Lord just leave us alone in good old Egypt where we were always so happy and satisfied? There we had melons and leeks and garlic to spice things up on occasion. But now the monotony of this manna is killing us. We wish we were already dead.

I'm not exaggerating. This is the situation Moses is facing in the lead up to today's text. One fine morning the Israelites wake up, peer out of their tents, and they see it again: manna covering the desert floor. The Lord has provided for their daily needs. And they throw a nationwide temper tantrum. Grown men and women stand crying like babies, wailing about their unbearably cruel fate.

Hearing this, Moses, their leader, also snaps. His patience fails him. He storms over to the Tabernacle of the Lord and throws his own temper tantrum. "Why do you hate me, Lord? Why did you lay on me the burden of carrying these ungrateful whiners all the way to Canaan? I'm not their mother! I didn't give them birth. I am sick to death of their constant complaining. If you care for me at all, please just kill me now and get it over with."

The Lord responded to Moses in two ways. The first dealt with the people and their complaining. And his answer falls into the category of what every kid in my generation used to hear from their parents; namely: "If you don't stop your crying, I'm going to give you something to cry about." The Lord said, "Sick of the manna, are you? Okay, I'll give you meat to eat. You'll have meat not just one day, not for two, not even for a whole week. No, I'm going to give you meat for an entire month, until you can't stand looking at it, until you're sick of eating it, until it comes shooting out of your nostrils." And that's pretty much what happened; except it didn't take a month for them to become sick of it. As it happened, the next day the Lord sent enormous flocks of quail to the Israelite camp. There were millions of birds, piled up so deep on the ground that you had to wade through them. The people were delighted at the change of menu. Soon they were stuffing their greedy faces, gorging themselves on the bounty of tasty birds. And just as they got to the point at which they couldn't swallow another tidbit without bursting their bloated bellies, and they were contentedly licking the grease from their fingers – that's when the vomiting began. Imagine something like two million people all violently ill at the same time, and for the next several hours. And you know how it goes: if you eat something that you like and later have to spit it up, it's a long time before you want to eat that thing again. Just the smell of it turns your stomach. But that's all they had for the next month. Lesson learned: be careful what you ask for.

It's the second part of the Lord's response to Moses that we see playing out in the text we read. The Lord told Moses, "I'll get you some help." Now, it happens that the seventy elders had been selected previously and were already helping Moses with civil concerns. They were acting as magistrates, hearing cases and settling disputes between the people. The really tough cases they referred to Moses.

But discontent with the Lord's gracious provision, ingratitude for all that he did to rescue them, failure to see and appreciate how truly blessed they were, and impatience for not having yet received the promised goal – all these are spiritual problems. Thus, they require a spiritual solution.

So, it is that the Lord tells Moses to gather the 70 elders and direct them to stand with him at the Tabernacle. Then the Lord visibly descends in a cloud. He takes of the Spirit that he had already placed on Moses, and puts it also on the 70 elders. And as soon as the Spirit came to rest on them, they began to prophesy, that is, they supernaturally spoke forth the Word of the Lord, just as Moses had been doing ever since he was commanded by the Lord to be his spokesman. In this way the Lord relieved Moses of some of the burden of leading and guiding the people spiritually.

Couple things to point out here: first, that in the Lord's taking from the Spirit on Moses, it in no way diminished the level or amount of the Spirit that Moses had. No, the Holy Spirit is like a river of living water. Take as much as you want from it, and the level never goes down. Second, the Spirit does not confine Himself to any certain place or location. That's shown by the two elders Eldad and Medad who, for reasons not explained, didn't respond to the summons to appear at the Tabernacle. I don't know, maybe it was the day Daylight Savings Time goes into effect and they forgot to reset their watches. Whatever the cause they didn't go to the usual place the Lord met with Moses; but they prophesied nevertheless, showing that the Spirit rested on them as well.

When the report of this reaches Moses and the others who are still at the Tabernacle, young Joshua, Moses' aide-de-camp, is upset and wants them to stop. He sees it as a challenge to Moses' authority. But not Moses; he's glad to have the mantle of spiritual responsibility shared. It's this that prompts him to express the desire that all of God's people might receive the Spirit and have it rest upon them.

It is the fulfillment of Moses' desire that we celebrate today. I wish I could explain it better, but there is something qualitatively and fundamentally different about the way the Holy Spirit rested upon God's people and did his work through them in Old Testament times and the way he does now, ever since the Spirit's outpouring on the day of Pentecost. The reason for this difference is clear enough. The Holy God cannot dwell with sinners. Nor, as sinners, would we want him too because that would utterly destroy us. For sinners our God is a consuming fire. So, in order for God's Spirit to rest upon us, we must be cleansed of sin. We must be washed and redeemed and made holy. We must be born from above.

And that is what we are through the redeeming work of Jesus. By the suffering and death of God's Son on the cross for our sin, by his resurrection for our justification, by our union with him in Holy Baptism, we have been made a fit dwelling place for the Spirit of God. And our God and Father now takes from the Spirit that rests upon Jesus the Son and he places it on us so that we are empowered by him to do supernatural things – the chief of which is to have faith in this Gospel that washes us, redeems us, saves us, and grants us eternal life.

The Old Testament saints didn't have that. Obviously, the Spirit was working in them to some degree because they did have faith, but what that is we can't say because we can't go back there and experience it. Nor should we want to. You probably never thought you'd hear me say it, but as much as I love the Old Testament, living in New Testament times is better.

And the constant failures and pathetic complaining of the Israelites traveling to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses show us why. I mean, we read these accounts and we wonder how people who saw and experienced what they did – all those miraculous signs and wonders – and who received all that they did from the Lord's hand every day; how could they be so stubbornly ungrateful, rebellious, impatient, and unfaithful. The answer is that they show us what the old unredeemed, sinful nature in each of us looks like. Apart from the

work of the Spirit who rests upon you, you're looking at yourself when you look at them. The fact that you have any faith, gratitude, patience, or obedience to the Lord comes from the new nature in you which is generated by the Holy Spirit.

It's vital that we understand this because we too are on a journey. We're in the desert of this age and we're heading to the Promised Land of the age to come. As he did for the Israelites, the Lord has performed mighty wonders by rescuing us from the slavery of sin. He led us through the water of Baptism that gave us new birth and destroyed the pursuing host of Satan that would keep us in bondage. And he sustains our faith on the way with bread from heaven, by which I mean his powerful Word and the body and blood of Jesus given to us in Holy Communion.

The temptation is to look at this daily bread with contempt. It is, after all, always the same thing, it never changes. It's confession and absolution. It's hearing about Jesus and his saving work on our behalf. It's kneeling at the rail for the sacramental elements. It's receiving the benediction. It's being told how we are to serve, love, and forgive one another and it's striving to do it.

The sinful nature in you despises it, is sick to death of it, wants no more of it, would like to go back to Egypt. The new nature in you knows better. The new nature craves the Lord's daily bread. Your new nature understands that these are the very means by which the Lord causes his Spirit to rest upon you so that in faith you can keep on the journey that leads to your glorification with Jesus in the age to come.

And so we pray: Lord, give us this day our daily bread. And come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***