

Living Manna

Holy God, teach us the breadth and depth of Your love, that we may trust our lives to You, offering our past and this present moment and our future to Your infinite grace. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.



Fledgling American Robin *Photo: Pat Kavanagh*

Early the other morning, I went outside with my mug of coffee, drawn by the lyrical songs of Carolina wrens, warblers, and robins. I noticed something hidden in the grass a few inches from the walkway: a small, dark presence, barely visible, covered by clover. When I leaned closer, a nearby robin became agitated, chirping in alarm. I realized that before me was a baby robin, a fledgling: dark fuzzy down with white flecks, a tiny yellow beak. It was trembling, its breast heaving with anxiety. The parent robin chirped frantically and I quietly moved away. My husband and I researched what to do. We watched during the day and were relieved to see the parent robin hopping over to the baby. We read that when parent birds

tend a stranded fledgling, concerned humans should leave the baby alone. So we did.

We were heartened that it had moved several inches by evening to nestle against the raised walkway, a safer location. But the next morning, our relief turned to sadness when we looked and saw no more signs of life. The parent robin was no longer nearby. During the night, the baby robin had breathed its last; insects had begun their ecologically important work of breaking down its body for the soil.

It was beautiful, the way the parent robin nurtured the baby while it was dying. Such compassion is the beating heart of every life lived in love. To care for living beings, to stay present to their suffering, to cherish life in every moment: God has made us for this, has made countless creatures for this! That baby robin mattered to God—Scripture tells us God’s eye is on the sparrow,¹ and the Creator’s love is infinite. There are divine lessons all around us, teaching us to embrace our kinship with every living thing. It is essential, in our era of global violence and climate catastrophe, that we cherish life especially in landscapes of death. Living in hope, we work for healing and solidarity in every way we can. Then when death becomes inevitable, we honor it as a sacred journey of the beloved toward boundless freedom in God.

Today Jesus draws us deeper into the mystery of Life through his teaching about manna, the “bread of angels” that rained down from heaven. ^{Ps 78:23–25; Wis 19:21} This

is when Jesus has just fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, and has exhorted the disciples to work not for “food that perishes” but “for the food that endures for eternal life.” ^{John 6:1–29} The work that lies before his followers—before us—is to believe in him. Belief is absolutely crucial in the Gospel of John. Believing in Jesus is demanding spiritual work, and there are vitally important ethical consequences that follow from it. We try to live in loving solidarity, sustained by the Bread of Life—because Jesus is the Bread of Life! He is the Bread that comes down from heaven, just as manna had come from heaven in days of old.

You may recall the story of the manna.² Israelite refugees are led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt. They journey through the wilderness, learning who their God is and who they are called to be, struggling in the harsh landscape, keenly aware of risks and dangers: lack of food, lack of fresh water, enemies on every side. The Israelites are joyful at their newfound freedom, ^{Exod 15:20–21} but they’re also vulnerable. Their Torah obedience is fragile, like a newly fledged bird. Anxiety shadows their steps, flaring regularly into panic. How will they live? Surely they will starve! The people balk. They hurl angry accusations at Moses, claiming that enslavement would be better than this fresh misery. God hears their cry—and God responds. Morning dawns, and there is a sweet flaky substance covering the ground. Manna! The Israelites bake it into cakes and hear God’s promise: they will survive.

Every day except the sabbath, for forty years, God nurtures these fledgling believers with the miracle of manna. ^{Exodus 16} It melts and vanishes every day, which teaches

them over and over to trust in God's loving provision. As decades pass in the wilderness, all but two from that first generation of Israelites die—not under the whip of the Egyptian overseer, but safe among their kin and accompanied by their Redeemer. I like to imagine the divine pillar of cloud by day turning into a radiant pillar of fire as the final darkness falls for each of them,

each one breathing their last with the sweet taste of manna on their lips.

When Jesus says, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died,” make no mistake: Jesus is not slamming the manna as insufficient, as some lesser miracle now eclipsed by Jesus's own Incarnation. That way lies supersessionism. Variations on that pernicious reading still surface in Christian anti-Judaism, and they utterly miss the point. God's gift of holy manna had sustained life for generations in the wilderness! The Israelites have been taught by God³—fed by manna, nourished by the commandments Moses received on Sinai, strengthened by practices of obedience. Manna represents not just food but formation in the ways of God!⁴ Later Jewish interpreters suggested the manna provided everything each believer needed, ministering to every person uniquely and changing to suit every taste. ^{Wis 16:20–21} The marvelous story of the manna is a living testimony to the power of God, nurturing everyone who hears it, including Jesus and the disciples. When Jesus says, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died,” his point is, believers should trust in that same God,⁵ not just for resilience in this life but for something deeper: eternal life!

“It is written in the prophets,” Jesus reminds them: ““They shall all be taught by God.”” He’s quoting Isaiah 54:13, a luminous oracle that confirms the love of God for Israel from the days of Noah to the present. Spend three minutes reading Isaiah 54 if you want to be bathed in gorgeous language about God’s mercy, everlasting love, and compassion. ^{Isa 54:7–14} Jesus emphasizes the universality of God’s love: “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father,” on any level, in any way, is offered the promise of eternal life! That’s what Jesus makes manifest in his healing and feeding of multitudes of people—not only Jews, not only believers, but all who come to him!

The Gospel of John beckons Jew and Gentile, believer and skeptic alike to “Come and see” this Jesus. ^{John 1:46} As the story of Doubting Thomas will show us later on, the Gospel draws us toward belief in Jesus even when we cannot see him, ^{20:29} when our vision is occluded by doubt or despair.⁶

This is good news:

Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, is living Manna to all who hunger,

everyone who has ever sought the Holy and learned from God! ^{6:45}

Anyone who has ever prayed, no matter how haltingly—

anyone who has ever been moved by the theology of a hymn,

anyone who offers wordless thanks to the Creator for a magnificent sunset,

who knows God cherishes every living thing,

from the fearless snow leopard to a trembling baby robin!

When we open our hearts to holy Wisdom,
we find living Manna all around us,
given to strengthen us in our present moment and for eternity!

So we gather in this sanctuary,
learning how to be present to one another and to the world God so loves,^{3:16}
stretching out our hands for the Bread of Life,
praising our Lord even when we are anxious, fragile, or lost.

Our ancestors died—yes. Every one of us will die, as all living things do.

God’s provision for our needs is no less miraculous for that.

Our Savior acknowledges the truth of mortality on this side of the veil.

And knowing deeply our fragility and our vulnerability,

Jesus promises fresh joy:

unending life in the radiant compassion of God,
in the company of all who have ever heard the voice of Love!

Today, that promise—that living Manna—is for each one of you:

“Taste and see that the LORD is good!” Ps 34:8

God is with you:

the God who created the oceans and the rainforests,
the same God who sustained our ancestors in every kind of wilderness,
the God who this very day pours out compassion on those who suffer
and feeds all who hunger!

God is with you,

God loves you,

and God has created you for eternal life,

through the One whose love is invincible,^{Eph 2:4–7; Rom 8:35–39}

the Living Word of God^{John 1:1–4} and Life itself:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

11 August 2024

Proper 14B

1 Kings 19:4–8; Psalm 34:1–8; Ephesians 4:52–5:2; John 6:35, 41–51

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ On God knowing and nurturing living creatures in addition to human beings, see Pss 50:10–11; 104:10–30; 136:25; Matt 6:26 // Luke 12:24.

² Biblical traditions hold that 600,000 male infantry, not counting women and children, left Egypt (Exod 12:37) and that 603,550 male warriors were enrolled in the second year after the departure from Egypt (Num 1:46). Those hyperbolically large numbers are meant to suggest the massive size of the community and need not be taken as historically precise for those traditions to have meaning.

³ For linkages in Mediterranean antiquity between food/eating and wisdom/learning via what they style the IDEAS ARE FOOD metaphor, see Steven Muir and Frederick S. Tappenden, “Edible Media: The Confluence of Food and Learning in the Ancient Mediterranean,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 3–4 (2017): 123–147. They argue that not only does manna teach the Israelites about God’s power to provide, but “the special treatment of pre-Sabbath manna is ... a way to encourage Israelites to develop the ritualized avoidance of work during Sabbath and the use of that time to study Torah,” in what they characterize as “twin emphases of learning about the host”—that is, God—“and learning about the community of guests” (132).

⁴ See Susan E. Hylan on manna having “formed recipients as those who walk in God’s ways. Very early on, manna became a metaphor for seeking life with God by following God’s word” (“Seeing Jesus John’s Way: Manna from Heaven,” *Word & World* 33/4 (2013): 341–348, at 344).

⁵ Tucker S. Ferda argues, “The whole of John 6 telescopes climactic scenes from the Exodus and Wandering saga (in John’s order here): the feeding in the wilderness, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the disputes of the people with God and Moses.... The persistent aim of the text is to refocus images and figures from that story around the person and work of Jesus” (“Flesh from Heaven: The Text of John 6.52 and its Intertext,” *New Testament Studies* 65 [2019]: 371–387, at 378–379).

⁶ Philip’s invitation to Nathanael, “Come and see!” (John 1:46), and Jesus’s words to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29), are undoubtedly intended by the author of the Fourth Gospel as signals for the spiritual formation of all believers and seekers in the post-Easter community who desire to follow Jesus.