

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 Pastor Bill Uetrict 7/29/21 10 Pentecost

This past week on three nights during Vacation Bible School, quite a few of us adults gathered to discuss the insights of Diana Butler-Bass in her compelling book, **Freeing Jesus**. The conversation was rich, the company, as always, was enlivening. The topic was my favorite one: Jesus. Bass in her book tells her own experience with Jesus by weaving it into the story that the church has been telling about Jesus for a long time, utilizing classic images for Jesus. The one that is compelling for me for our consideration today is the image of Jesus as way.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself says that he is the *way*, the truth, and the life. Sadly, many folks throughout church history and particularly in American evangelical history have seen these words as prescriptions for entering the next life. Believe in Jesus, he is the *way* after all, and you get to go to heaven when you die. And if you don't, you go to hell. Frankly, the text says nothing about heaven or hell. And it really isn't a threat. Jesus words in John are meant to be encouragement to disciples who are facing the reality that their teacher, their master is about to die. There will be a way for them to move into the future, Jesus is reassuring them. It's the kind of thing that you might say to someone grieving: you'll make it; you'll find a way.

Many people have interpreted these words of Jesus as a description of a destination, rather than a process, a journey with Jesus. You get Jesus, you get the goods. What if *getting* Jesus is not so much about what you get in the end, but the trip, the trek, the expedition that you are on together now. What if it is not so much about the goal, but the process? I often think that we often miss out on so much when we travel because we think only about the destination.

It amazes me how much of the Bible is concerned with the process, with the journey, the way. Our first reading for today includes a journey story. The people of Israel have left Egypt and are on their

way to the Promised Land, finding themselves in, where else, but the wilderness? You see, the wilderness is where much of life takes us. We don't always want to admit this. But the journey of life is often a wilderness journey. Jesus, after he was baptized, declared the beloved Son of God, was sent into the wilderness. This is where we all go, unless, of course, we, like many in contemporary culture, refuse to go there. But truthfully, even our refusal to go there, doesn't mean that we won't end up there.

The Jews are in the wilderness, and the wilderness is hard, so hard that they begin to long to be back in Egypt, where they were, by the way, slaves. The food, they say, was a lot better back in the good old days—days when they had no rest, when they were pawns of Pharaoh.

This journey we travel can often bring us to amnesia. We forget so much. Oh, the past was so much better. Oh, the days when we were great, when men were men and women were women, and all the kids were above average. When we are on our way some place, sometimes we would rather go back to where we have been. It feels safer, less risky, more known. But the way, especially when you are traveling with Jesus, is always forward.

We know that, but still we complain, which is what the Israelites are doing in the midst of their journey. They are whining and belly aching. Actually, Exodus tells us a lot about the complaining of Israel when they are in the wilderness. Frankly, the Israelites look pitiful. Whine, whine, whine! Whining people look pitiful. Whenever Liam whines, I tell him that it hurts my ears; I can't stand listening to it. Whining often, not always, comes from the entitled, those who forget that life is not their due, those who always want more, or something different.

But frankly, I don't want to make too much of that. I want to give the Israelites some slack today. They are not unusual. Complaining,

while sometimes pathetic, is a part of the journey. The way isn't always certain, and sometimes it looks rather bleak. Sometimes when you are in the wilderness, you get really hungry and really thirsty. Much of life involves wondering whether there will be provision, whether there will be enough. Truthfully, we all wonder that. Sometimes the wondering has to do with food or money. Sometimes it has to do with strength and stamina, love or hope or forgiveness or grace. You go through hard times, you go through losses and deaths, unemployment, pandemics, depression and you wonder whether there will be enough to enable you to go forward. It's part of the way. The way of faith is the way of struggle, even sometimes the way of complaining.

The Bible is honest about that. And yet it still reassures. Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has *heard* your complaining.'" Now honestly, God in the wondering-in-the-wilderness stories gets ticked off by the Israelites' complaining, as I sometimes get ticked off by people's complaining, but God, nonetheless, hears the whining of the people. And he responds, albeit sometimes passive-aggressively: "I am going to give you bread until it comes out of your nostrils!!" But still, God hears and God responds.

And in today's story from Exodus, God's response provides quail and manna. Playing with words, the author of Exodus calls this white thing that appears on the ground "manna" because the Hebrew word for manna means "what is it?", which is what the Israelites say when they see it. What is it?

You know, a lot of times during this journey we don't recognize the provision that is being given to us when it appears before us. Maybe we expected something else. Maybe we don't know what we are looking for. Maybe, we always need something else, something

greater, something better, something more than what someone else has.

The Exodus story for today warns us about that. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and *each day*, the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.’” The people are to get only what they need for the day. In a section of the story that is left out in our reading for today, there are warnings to people who gather too much and thus prevent others from getting their daily ration. On this journey, we have to think about equity. We can’t be satisfied with some having a whole lot and some having almost nothing. And we must realize that life isn’t about our amassing more and more and more, as if the meaning of life is always *more*.

Jesus in our gospel reading for today confronts the crowds with this critique: “You are looking for me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” Now elsewhere, he criticizes the crowds for being preoccupied with the signs, the miracles, as if the crowds just want to be wowed in life. But that was then, and this is now. Now he wishes that they had more interest in the miracles, and not just with another free lunch. He urges them to get beyond their bellies. “Do not,” he says, “work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man (he, Jesus) will give you.”

Being on the way with Jesus involves getting beyond a preoccupation with what much of this culture is centered on—more and more. If a little is good, more is better. More stuff. More money. Bigger houses. A larger stock portfolio. More attention. More affirmation. More notoriety. This is all food that perishes. Your notoriety will disappear. The affirmation will disappoint. Your stuff will end up in dumpsters or in the hands of your children who often don’t

have the same passion for the stuff or the More that you do. The money won't be able to buy what you really want.

To go with Jesus, the way, is to be taken to what truly matters, what John calls eternal life, what Jesus says is the "Bread of Life." The Lamborghini is fascinating. Your cottage and your home, they are beautiful. Your diamonds are stunning. Your bank account is impressive. But they are not the bread of life. The bread of life comes from something bigger than you. Jesus says that for the Israelites the manna in the wilderness did not come from themselves or even from their big hero Moses, but from God.

To be on the way with Jesus is to be discovered by that which truly matters, by the bread that fills the deepest needs of our souls. To travel the journey with Jesus is to be fed with the bread of life. The invitation is to see what is needed, is to pray with the crowds, "Give us this bread always." Fill us with the love that will never disappoint us, that will shape how we live, and will give us rest when we die.

Jesus is the way. And the way is not a product that you get. The way is a journey you are on. It's not always an easy journey. But it is a journey filled with provision. It is the journey of love, the bread of life, that truly fills our deepest hungers.