

"WHAT IS LOST WHEN YOU KEEP IT?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

There was a story being circulated back in the days when President Carter was in the White House. He was meeting with Prime Minister Begin of Israel about the negotiation of a peace in the Middle East. Since both were religious men and worshipped the same God they thought it would be a good idea to consult God on the matters that were before them. Carter offered to use his private phone to do it, and to pay the charges. So they placed the call, talked to God for five minutes. When the call was completed Carter asked the operator what the charges were. She said, "For five minutes that's \$142." Carter thought it was a little steep, but paid it anyway.

A few weeks later Carter was in Jerusalem visiting Prime Minister Begin. They decided once again it would be wise to consult with God. Begin said that he would place the call this time, on his phone. So he did, and they talked to God for almost an hour. After the call the operator came on the line and said, "That will be 25 cents." Carter was dumbfounded. He turned to Begin and asked, "Why is it that when I call God in Washington for five minutes it's \$142, and you call Him from here and we talk for an hour and it only costs 25 cents?" Begin said, "Because when you call God from Jerusalem it's a local call."

DEVELOPMENT

That's apocryphal, that story, but it has a certain credibility, because for Christians, as well as for Jews, Jerusalem is the Holy City, is it not? And Palestine is the Holy Land. We are people of a book, we Christians, and that book records the experience of a people who lived in that land up to thousands of years ago. They met God there in that land, and they would mark the places of meeting. They would remember by naming them in such a way so that in future generations they would know that here they had met God. And they would place stones together where epiphanies took place so that in later years the children would ask, "What do these stones mean?" and the mothers and the fathers would tell the children, "It was here that Abraham was tested by God in the sacrifice of Isaac", and "This is the place where your ancestors, against great odds, defeated the enemy with God's help". The children then would tell those stories to the next generation, and that generation to the next. And from these stories each generation would learn who they were as individuals, and who they were as a people, and who God is, and how God works in our lives.

Oh, it's a holy land. Just to walk through that land is to be reminded of God by rocks, and stones, and ancient oaks, and mountains, and rivers and towns and city walls. They all yield stories of God, stories that give meaning to our existence. That land is our land.

Nicholas Montsarrat wrote novels of the British navy during the Second World War. In one of the novels he describes a man sitting in a pub describing his heroic efforts at Dunkirk, that dramatic and decisive rescue of the British soldiers who had been backed up against the sea at Dunkirk by the German army; trapped there, and that amazing mobilization of almost every craft in England to sail across the Channel to bring their troops back home to England. This man told that story in the pub with infinite patience and precise detail. He described the cold, the smells, and he talked about the raw courage of his comrades. But the fact was that the man had never been at Dunkirk. He had worked in a

factory in the midlands throughout the war. And what's more, everybody in the pub knew that. But no one complained, said Montsarrat, because every Englishman was at Dunkirk.

Such is the power of stories. They give meaning and purpose and power to a people so that the story becomes our story, long after the event is passed. Just by telling the story we learn who we are, and see how God works in our lives. So although God is as close to us in New York City as He is in Jerusalem, I'm sure of that, yet it seems that He is closer there because of the stories. They are our stories. Every Christian was at the stable at Bethlehem, and at the hill outside Jerusalem, and with the exiles in Babylon, and with David fighting the Philistines. That's the way we're supposed to read them.

THE EXODUS

I want us now to look at that ancient story out of the Book of Exodus as if we were there. And our text for this morning picks up the story in the second act. Exodus is told in three acts. The first act is in Egypt, the time of slavery. The third act is in the Promised Land, the time of fulfillment. But the second act is the time of the wilderness, the time of struggle, the time of hard work, the time of suffering.

It's two and a half months since they left Egypt. They are in the middle of the Sinai desert, discouraged. They want to junk the whole enterprise now. The text reads,

"The whole congregation of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger!'"

After two and a half months they want to go home. They wonder if they have made the right decision. The old life doesn't look so bad after all. In fact, from the perspective of the wilderness the old life looks better than it really was. They were slaves in Egypt, but they have forgotten that. And they're on their way to a new life, to a Promised Land. But they've forgotten that, too. All they know is that what they are going through now is hell, and they want out of it.

A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

Have you ever been in a wilderness experience? Egypt is where you were and didn't want to be. You wanted a better life. You wanted freedom from some habit, from some pattern of behavior or some ways of thinking that were doing you little good. Or you wanted some more depth in your spiritual life. You wanted maturity and substance in your life. You wanted spiritual strength. Or maybe it was some circumstance that put you in the wilderness, not your own choice at all, but you were just put there, you didn't chose it. But there you are, and you start with the hope that you can make it. You believe that you can reach the goal now that you have set for your life. You can do it. You believe that. You set out to do it. You leave Egypt, leave the old life. And now you're there in the wilderness, and you discover it's hard. Oh, it's hard. You want to go back. Compared to this, slavery doesn't look so bad after all. Your mind tells you, I can't make it. Not everybody can make it. Maybe I'm one of those people who just can't make it.

This scene in the story is aimed at those of us who are in the wilderness, and are tempted to quit. We are called "the murmurers", "the congregation murmured against Moses", and the message to us is this. The God who called you out of your old life and put a dream in your heart, and gave you hope to sustain it, isn't going to abandon you now. You take each day at a time and He will strengthen you.

"And Moses said to Aaron, 'Say to the people, 'come near before the Lord, for He has heard your murmurings'....and the Lord appeared in the cloud". (That's the way He always appears, because God is always hidden.)....And He said, 'At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread.....' And that very evening quails came into the camp; and in the morning there was a thick fog obscuring their vision, and when it lifted there was on the ground a thing like hoarfrost and they asked, 'What is it?' And Moses said, 'It is the bread God promised to aid you on your journey."

We call it "manna" now, incidentally, because the Canaanitic word for "what" is manna. So manna is named for the question, what is it? Which means that the name itself of the sustenance that God gives us implies a mystery.

ONE CONDITION ABOUT MANNA

There was only one condition for receiving the manna. Only enough is given to you to help you through each day. The Hebrews tried to gather more of it so they could have security. They wanted to store it, but it rotted on them. So they were warned, take enough for each day, that's all. Hence the title of this sermon, containing both a riddle and a pun, making it about as good a title as I could ever come up with, "What is lost when you keep it?"

And that's a revelation. It's a revelation about grace. God gives you enough strength to make the journey from where you were to where you ought to be, but only enough strength to get you through each day. Bonhoeffer discovered that in prison. Remember his famous quotation, "He gives us grace, but never in advance lest we rely on our own strength and not on Him alone".

And that's why our Lord called His disciples to pray, "Give us this day our daily manna". That's all we can ask. Just enough to get through each day. And the model He gave us of the faithful person is the one who can go to bed at night and get a good night's sleep knowing that tomorrow there will be strength for that day, sufficient for the day.

It's interesting to note that there's still manna today in that inland region of the Sinai peninsula, and it's even called manna by the nomadic inhabitants of that region. It's a drop-like formation on leaves and on the ground caused by a tree or a bush that is native to that region. It's the Tamarisk tree, and the scientific name for the Tamarisk tree in that region is *tamarix mannafera*, which means that the type designation of the tree bears the name "manna". And we even know what causes the manna to appear on the Tamarisk tree or bush. It's formed from the secretion produced from the sting of a tree louse. Evidently when the insect punctures the bark there is a secretion which falls to the leaves or the

ground. In the heat of the desert it stays moist, as a liquid, until night when the cold air comes in and hardens it so that in the morning it is there like hoarfrost. And you can pick it up and eat it, which they did, along with the quails that can still be seen in that part of the Sinai Desert, even today.

Maybe that's the way it happened. We don't know. But we do know that they survived the ordeal not knowing where the strength was going to come from for them to finish their journey, but it came. It came just enough, always at the right time, in ways and at times that they could never have dreamed.

That's the revelation. The God who calls us to a new life will give us strength to achieve it. He'll be hidden as in a cloud, and His works we will not see, as in a mist. It will seem to us that we are on our own, indeed, that we are all alone. But strength will come. So watch and be ready. Look for Him to feed you anywhere, anytime, and by any means.

FINDING THE MANNA

One of the gratifying and humbling words that we receive around here is the word that that happens in church sometimes. Sometimes in the sermon, in what is said, but often as not in what is heard rather than in what is said. Something got hold of the word that the preacher spoke and shaped it to fit the contours of a particular heart. After the service somebody will thank me for what is said. They tell me what they heard, and I didn't say it. Not like that, anyway. Something or someone got hold of it and shaped it for the need of a particular heart.

Sometimes it comes not from the sermon but from the prayer. Sometimes it comes from the music. And sometimes, they tell me, it comes from just being here. It's as if the Church is an oasis in the desert, and in the morning, if you look for it, there's manna here. They say, "The Church helped me get through the week."

And it can happen outside the Church, too. There is no manna monopoly in the Church. God is really quite reckless with manna. He spreads it everywhere. I learned long ago when to find it, in one place. I'll share it with you. Years ago when I was a young pastor I had to go calling on older people, and I confess that I really didn't want to do it. I've always been sort of a social bumpkin. There was such a distance between my age and the age of these people who were in these pews when I came here in 1956. I was young. I'm much closer to some of them now, but in those days it seemed like a big gap between us, and I didn't know what to say to many of them. I'd go up to the buzzer, ring it, count to five and conclude no one was home.

But I had to do it. It was part of my job. So I went calling, murmuring. And you know what I found? Manna! You ask them about their journeys, these older pilgrims and they'll tell you things wonderful. They'll tell you things you haven't experienced. Someday you will but they've experienced them already.

I remember in the Book of Proverbs there's a lovely phrase for a woman. In it is this phrase, "Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come." What a marvelous phrase - "She laughs at the time to come". Well, I've heard that laughter...from men and women who have been through it all, who have seen so much, who now know that they live their lives day by day on trust and on faith.

I remember one woman who, every night before she went to bed, would write a

note of instruction, and leave it on the dining room table in case she did not wake up the next morning. She would show me that note and laugh. I wonder... have you ever heard an old pilgrim laugh at the time to come? It's like manna from heaven.

Yes, Church is one place where you receive manna. And listening to some old pilgrims is another place you can receive it. But there are just as many who have found it alone in the time of daily prayer. Perhaps you have.

CLOSING Someday you and I may have to walk through the wilderness on our own, either by choice because we want a new life, or by circumstance because the old life has been taken away.

The Exodus message applies to all of us. Someone present this hour may really need to hear it. When the going is rough and the promise seems so far away at the moment that it can never be achieved, and the temptation is to go back because we know that we do not have the strength adequate to keep going, if we keep on going we'll be fed. So here's the instruction and the take home word: in the morning, take a moment to pray for daily bread. And in the evening before dropping off to sleep, give thanks to God for making it through another day!

PRAYER And now confirm within us the certainties and the feelings of this hour of worship. Remind us that even in the wilderness of life you are there present with us to guide us and to help us. Make us sensitive to Your presence and nearness and give to each of us the "manna", the daily bread that we need to go forward. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen.