

*Lectionary 26*

September 30, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 9: 38-50)

John said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So this was flea market week. So many volunteers, so many hours of work, so much stuff. Downstairs we had a blue fox coat. We had four-dozen sets of tablecloths and napkins, formerly of the St. Paul Hotel. We had a robo-raptor robotic dinosaur, now residing in Emily’s office. And jade plants with a pedigree. We had books, we had household items, clothing, sporting goods. A lot of stuff.

Sometime around Wednesday, I went downstairs and I asked, “What is the goofiest item you have seen so far this week?” This is what I got – it’s a bowling pin dressed up like a penguin. At some point this had a point, but now it’s at the flea market. It is stuff.

We all have stuff, so at least once a year we clean it up and we give it away. We let it go. But letting go is harder with some things than others. You know, that old, beat-up sweater that you look at and think, "I should give this away this year." "Well, maybe next year." Or that old beat-up table, you say, "But it belonged to Aunt Betty." The old, beat-up relationship, or habit, or memory. They are hard to let go.

Today, in the Book of Numbers, we heard about the difficulty of letting go. The fourth book of the Bible describes the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. In Hebrew, the title of this book is not "Numbers," as in census numbers. It is actually "on the way." These people are on the way in the wilderness.

The book describes what happens after God's people are freed from slavery in Egypt, after they crossed the Red Sea, heading toward the Promise Land, after they gathered at Mount Sinai; after Moses received the Ten Commandments; and after that unfortunate incident of the golden calf. They have now left Mount Sinai, and they are on the way. On the way in the wilderness, physically and metaphorically.

And, like any travelers on the way, there are those in the back seat that are not happy. Has anybody here taken "the family trip"? You know, you stuff kids in the back seat and off you go. "I'm hungry!" "How much further is it?" "He touched me!" "I got to go to the bathroom." Have you been there, anybody? Oh, yes. Well, the Israelites were just like the kids in the back seat. Today's chorus went like this:

*"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to eat."*

Why are these Israelites holding on to a beat-up old memory of Egypt? Anyone can see that it's time to let that one go. But they are saying, "*We remember the fish and cucumbers and the melons and the leeks.*" What they are not remembering is that they were slaves. Their bodies were broken. Their children were slaughtered. They were demeaned and humiliated in Egypt. They had no freedom. But there were melons and leeks and onions and cucumbers. Would you be willing to give up your freedom and your children's freedom for a cucumber? Of course not. And neither would they.

There is something more going on here. Why are they afraid to give up the past? I think it's because they don't trust the future. They don't trust God to care for them, so they cling to the devil they know instead of the God they can't see. "*If only we were back in Egypt.*" They were having trouble letting go of that for the sake of what could be.

And it broke God's heart. God was angry because they clung to the past and they couldn't see the miracles that were happening in their midst right now. They couldn't see that God was right there. They couldn't see all that God provided. They couldn't see that God was giving them a future.

In other words, they were missing the miracles that were right in front of them. I can count three miracles from the reading today. Three. The first one was the manna. The people were tired of eating manna. They were tired of the sameness, the dailyness of manna. But it was still a miracle. Manna was provided every morning. Every day and twice on Friday there was manna. They were given all that they needed.

Today, researchers believe that manna is a substance that's secreted by tree lice feeding on sycamore trees. How about that? It could be dried and ground into flour, and baked into bread. High in carbohydrates, very nutritious. And it won't keep. Because of its high sugar content, it attracts ants, so you have to use it the day that you gather it. Sounds familiar? It is still gathered today by Bedouins in the desert. It is still called manna.

Now, because we know that this is a natural phenomenon, does that make it any less a miracle? Is the miracle in how it arrives or that it arrives? Isn't it the miracle that God provides? God provided daily bread. And the Israelites couldn't see that, because they wanted cucumbers and leeks back in Egypt.

And how many daily miracles do we miss, because they are daily, ordinary, things God gives without a lot of splash, but no less miracles of God's care.

The second miracle in this reading, that the Israelites missed because they were hanging on to the past, were the quails. That actually was in part of the reading that was left out. I don't know if you noticed, but today's reading was in little pieces. It's a part that was left out. But it's so good I'm going to read it to you now, beginning with verse 18:

*[God said to Moses,] "Say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.' Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month'! Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" The Lord said to Moses, — And this is the best part. You should go home and underline this in your Bible. — The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."*

A few verses later God provides quail, miles of quail. Now, quail naturally flock to that area during certain times of the year, like geese in the fall, or pigeons in the city. And, once again, just because it's a natural phenomenon, was it any less a miracle of God providing for them? Daily miracles. Easy-to-miss miracles.

And then there is the third miracle. The third miracle was the most precious. Moses was done. He'd had it. He was crumbling under the load of these whining people. He couldn't do everything, and he told God so. Then God gave God's spirit to seventy of the elders, and they prophesied, inside and outside the camp. And Moses dreamed, "*Would that the Lord's people were all prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them!*"

God shares God's spirit. God shares God's power, so the miracles of God can be expanded, and the love of God can reach even more, so the love of God can spread like quails in the sky or manna on the earth, to all of God's people.

We, who are marked with the cross of Christ, have been filled with the Holy Spirit. Like the elders of Israel, we too can prophesy. Now, "prophesy" never meant foreseeing the future. I don't know where that came from. To prophesy is to see God's work now. To see what God is doing now and tell about it. We can see, and be, God's miracles on earth. Are we any less miracles because we are common and everyday? Can we not, each and every one of us, show God's love and provision for others?

Now, we might have to give up some old broken fears or behaviors to be able to focus on God and not ourselves. We may have to learn to trust a bit more that God is leading us into the future. We might have to stop and intentionally look and listen for God's presence among us. But as God says, "*Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true among you or not.*"

We are God's presence here. We are God's prophets. We are God's miracle workers. Go and do the work of a loving and powerful God. And leave the rest for next year's flea market.

Amen.