

Exodus 16:2-15 (John 6:33-35)

I begin our sermon today with an object lesson. I'm holding something in my hand. Some of you have eaten this. It's a square of Life cereal. Many of you remember the classic television commercial from the 70s and 80s. Two boys are sitting at a table with a bowl of Life. One asks, "What's this stuff?" The other says, "Some cereal; supposed to be good for you." Neither boy is willing to try it, so they push it over to Mikey. "He won't eat it; he hates everything!" "Hey Mikey! He likes it!"

The cereal is called Life, but it could be called Manna. In fact, had the boys in the commercial been speaking Hebrew instead of English, the first word they said was manna. "What's this stuff?" or ("What is it?") means manna in Hebrew. It's what the Israelites said when they saw the white, flaky bread on the ground. "Manna." "What is it?" "What's this stuff?" Moses replied, "*It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.*"

Now they did not go to find Mikey in the crowd. They all ate it and were satisfied. It fed them every morning through all their years of wandering in the wilderness. But even as they ate it, they struggled with it. They were full of questions about the manna, and also many complaints. Questions are not bad when they are asked humbly in faith. This is what we will do today regarding the manna, both for the Israelites, and then for us.

The What question was already asked and answered. "What is it?" "*It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.*" Let's ask the Where question. Where is it? The manna was on the "*face of the wilderness,*" says our text. It lay on the ground outside their tents. It was within their reach; not high up on trees or mountains. It was easily accessible to them.

The next question is When? When is it? Every morning, except on the Sabbath. As soon as the dew lifted, the manna was there--a fine, flake-like thing; fine as frost on the ground.

Let's ask the Why question. Why is it? Why is this manna here? Because the people were hungry, that's why. They came grumbling to Moses and Aaron. "*You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill (us) with hunger!*" they complained. What a nice prayer that was! Accusing God, through His servants, of plotting to starve all these people to death. That was never what God intended. But the people were siding with Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan led her to believe that God was withholding goodness from her in forbidding her to eat of the tree in the midst of the Garden. As soon as she thought this, she fell into unbelief. This was also the sin of the Israelites. "God is withholding goodness from us," they believed. "He led us out here just to kill us with hunger!" So does God return evil for evil here? No. He returns good for evil. He feeds them despite their grumbling. He gives them bread from heaven to eat.

And now the Who question. Who is it? Or perhaps we should ask: For whom is it? The manna was for the people. And not just for some, but for all of them. "*It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.*"

Now here we are asking all these questions about the bread that was given 3,500 years ago. What's in it for us? A history lesson? Ancient history at that? Not if we see ourselves in the shoes, or sandals, of the Israelites. And we do if we believe what Jesus says. In today's Gospel He says, "*The bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*" We walk in the shoes of the Israelites because just as they were given manna to eat, so are we.

And so we begin now back with the Who question. This one: Who is it? And actually, the Who and What questions are the same. The manna that God gives you to eat is not a thing; it's a person. What is the manna that we eat today? We should ask: Who is it? It's Jesus. He is our manna. "*The bread of God,*" He says, "*is He who comes down from heaven...I am (this) bread of life.*" The manna that lay on the ground for the Israelites was food for the belly. Jesus is food for the soul. He is the living Bread that comes down from heaven.

So now the Why question. Why is it? Why does God give us this living Bread? Because we are on a journey, too. Without the manna, the Israelites would have perished in the wilderness. Our journey through life is just as grueling, and no one makes it without Jesus. It matters not how much self-confidence you have, or how much will-power. You will perish...I will perish...without the Bread of Life.

Maybe Life cereal is aptly named. Manna...("What's this stuff?") But we call it Life. A bowl of it may help get you through your day. But Jesus is the manna from above who takes you through each day of your life and into the life to come.

Let's ask the Where and When questions together. Where and when is it? It's right here and now. God did not put the manna high up in trees for the Israelites to go up after it. He gave it where they were. He does the same thing for you. He makes Jesus accessible to you. He puts a Bible and Catechism in your hands. He puts His church in your neighborhood. He places the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in the font, and the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the altar. All within your reach. You don't have to cross swamps and mountains, and climb tall trees, to get the living Bread. You don't have to climb up into heaven, as if we could, to receive this Bread. God puts it...He puts Christ right where you live.

And so we have no excuse. If there was an Israelite too lazy to go out and gather up the manna, he, or she, would have starved and perished. This is not what God wants for you. Christ is everywhere, but He is not for you everywhere. The Israelites had to physically go to where the manna was at the time when it was on the ground for them. Is this so difficult for us? Christ is here as living Bread for you each and every Sunday morning. He will be here for you tomorrow evening in our Casual Class. He is in the bread and wine sitting on the altar every Sunday. Those who are spiritually lazy will starve. Let this not be you.

And now we ask the Who question again, but in this way: For whom is it? Jesus, the living Bread, who gives life...for whom is this precious manna? Is it for all? Is it for you? Here is what Jesus says, "*I am the Bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger...*" This living Bread is for all who hunger. Is this you? Has your journey through life's wilderness been grueling? Have others treated you unfairly? Are your sins a burden for you? Do you need forgiveness?

Not everyone says "Yes" to these. They are not hungering for Jesus...yet. If you are, then here is the manna for you. Jesus, according to His promise, comes down from heaven for you now as food for your soul. Food you eat with your ears, and food that enters your mouth in the Sacrament. None of you is disqualified on account of your sinfulness. But you are disqualified only if you have no sin to confess. Let this not be you. You are worthy to come to the Sacrament only if you are a grievous sinner, but a sinner who sees Jesus as food, as forgiveness for you.

There is not one of you who was left out when Christ took the sins of the world to His cross. He died for all; He died for you. And like a grain of wheat is planted in the ground, so His body was planted in the tomb. And as a wheat grain sprouts and becomes bread to eat, so Jesus rose on the Third Day, and now He is the living Bread of heaven for you.

Are you hungry? Do you have sins that need cleansing? The word Jesus puts in your ears does what it says. You are forgiven of your sins. Jesus forgives you. And through His forgiveness, He gives you life. He will help you in your grueling journey. He will bring you into the life to come. Jesus is the manna you need for each day. Take and eat. Amen.