

A Long, Hard Journey To a Promised Land: Bread in the Morning

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
By Rev. Dean Snyder
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Exodus 16:1-3; 13-21
John 6:30-35

I want to ask you to think with me during this season of epiphany about in-between places in our lives: the times and places in our lives where the old truth don't seem so true anymore but we haven't figured out what the new truth is; times and places in our lives when the old rules don't work as well as they use to but we haven't figured out yet what the new rules are; times and places in our lives where the way we used to do things isn't working so well anymore but we haven't come up yet with the new ways to do things that will work.

In between places in our lives. Jane and I took a long weekend off last week and went to New York City to see some plays; usually we stay up in the theater district but this time we decided we wanted to be near my favorite vegetarian vegan restaurant, the most decadent vegetarian restaurant on the face of the earth, Kate's place in lower Manhattan, where we ate chicken-fried tofu, vegan mashed potatoes and gravy and vegan cheese cake. So we went to one of those computer services where you bid on a hotel in the section of the city where you want to be and take any hotel in that section of the city they give you. We designate lower Manhattan and we ended up in the Hilton hotel across the street from where the twin towers use to be ... on the 50th floor with our window looking down on the hole in the ground where the World Trade Centers used to be.

Jane and I spent much of last weekend sitting by our window and staring into the hole in ground in lower Manhattan. Our nation, I think, since September 11th, 2001, has been in an in-between place. The old rules that we use to live by don't apply anymore but we don't know yet what the new rules will be and we're fumbling around trying to figure our how to be a part of this world which seems to have changed all around us. We are in an in-between place and an in-between time.

Our churches are in an in-between place; the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church and other denominations are at an in between place. The old rules don't work anymore. But we're not sure yet what the new rules are going to be.

Many of us as individuals find ourselves time and again through out our lives in in-between places. I am at an in-between place in ministry; I knew a year ago who I was and what my job was be better than I know now.

Life is full of in-between places. The precedent for this in Scripture is the children of Israel after they have left Egypt and before they've reached the Promised Land. The children of Israel spent forty years in between Egypt and the Promise Land. The children of Israel spent forty years in an in-between place before they got to the Promised Land.

During Epiphany, these early weeks of the year of 2004, I want us to invite you to walk with the children of Israel during those forty years of their in-between place in the hopes that we can understand better what it means for us when we are in our in-between places.

I want to start this journey this morning by saying three things. First: God keeps us in in-between places for a reason.

God keeps us in in-between places for a reason: the children of Israel spent forty years in an in-between place, traveling from Egypt to the land of Israel. If they had traveled it in a straight line it may have taken them six months. Some say they could have made it in four months. But God kept the children of Israel in an in-between place for forty years. God keeps us in in-between places for a reason.

When Moses led the children of Israel through the Red Sea, he got the people out of oppression but it took forty years in an in-between place to get the oppression out of people. It took forty years in an in-between place because if the children of Israel had traveled from bondage and oppression in Egypt directly to the Promised Land, the Promised Land would have simply become another Egypt ... (which is eventually what happened anyway and then God had to take the children of Israel out of Israel into exile into another in-between place, according to the biblical story).

God keeps us in in-between places in our lives for a reason, and the worse thing that we can do is try to move out from our in-between places too quickly. As uncomfortable and as uneasy as we become in our in-between places it is sometimes where we need to be. It is where God keeps us because the real growth in our lives doesn't happen either in oppression or in the Promised Land; it happens in the in between place.

Growth is always uncomfortable; not knowing the rules is always uncomfortable; ambiguity rather than clear truth is uncomfortable. We're ready to get out of those in-between places and grab the first train to wherever, but God keeps us in an in-between place until we're ready for the Promise Land.

The second thing that I want to say to start out this journey with the children of Israel through their in between place is this: An in-between place is a hard place to be; it's a frightening place to be. The children of Israel thought they were going starve to death in the in-between place. The first thing that the children wanted to do was to go back to Egypt because in Egypt they would at least knew where their next meal was coming from and they'd knew what their next meal was.

In their in-between place, the Israelites longed for the flesh pots that they ate from in Egypt: stewed beef and gravy and biscuits. There were no flesh pots in Israel's in-between place.

The Israelites thought they were going to starve to death until the word came from God that God would provide bread for them. God instructed Moses to have them go out in the morning after the dew had dried up, and they would discover bread from heaven on the ground. They went out and found it. They named it manna.

Now the word manna in Hebrew means "What is it?". The reason they named it manna is because they picked it up and looked at it and said "What is it?" And then they ate it and tasted it and said "What is it?" So they called it manna because the manna that sustained them in the in-between place was totally different from the flesh pot that they were use to back in the land of Egypt.

The in-between place is a hard place because we are not sustained and comforted by the old truths and the old rules and the old certainties that use to feed us and make us feel safe back in Egypt. But the good news our spiritual ancestors, the children of Israel, have left for us in Scripture is this: in the in-between place there will be bread from heaven that will sustain us and that will keep us alive through our journey to the Promise Land. It won't be the old ways and it won't be the old comforts. It wouldn't be stewed beef and biscuits and gravy. But in the midst of in-between places of our life journeys, God will not desert us.

There will be manna in the morning; and we will be able to pick up enough so that it will sustain us for a day. And then the next day there will be manna in the morning again and we will be able to pick up enough and it will sustain us for another day in the in-between place. And it was even true; if you read the story that

when it got to the sixth day, there was enough manna to keep Israel over until the seventh day, so that they could have a Sabbath -- a time for community, prayer and rest. God will sustain us in the in-between place.

The third thing I want to suggest this morning is this: When the early church emerged, this new community of faith with a new vision of God's presence in the world and a new vision of what God was striving to do in the world, when the early church came into being the first Christians said that Jesus was the manna in the in-between place they were traveling. Jesus is the manna in the in-between places of our lives. If you wonder sometime where Jesus is in your life, look for those things that sustain you in the in-between places and times.

It may not look the same as the comforts that sustained you back in Egypt. You may pick it up and say "What is it?" The answer is: It is Jesus. Jesus is the "What is it?" that sustains us in the in-between place, when we're not quite sure how we're going to get from here to where we believe we ought to be.

Sometimes Jesus may take the shape of a friend who reaches out to us when we really need someone to care for us. Sometimes Jesus take the shape of a courage within ourselves that we never imagined was there until we needed it. Sometimes Jesus is the spirit that just moves us and gets us out of bed in the morning when we're not quite sure what we're doing this day but keep going anyway. Jesus is the manna in the in-between places of our lives.

I think this is an in between time for America. I think a lot of us are confused about what we ought as a nation to do and be in relationship to the rest of the world. What is our place in the world now?

It is an in-between time and place for the church of Jesus Christ.

Some of us are at in-between places of our own journey between Egypt, where we've been, and the Promise Land to which we are going.

But there is manna on the ground in the morning and there is enough to see us through until tomorrow.