

“The Father Who Fills”

Introduction: I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the Bible speaks an awful lot about food! From crops that grow in fields, to meals that the faithful share, to the heavenly banquet toward which we are heading, God seems to use this basic stuff of life to teach us many things about him and about us. My brother in law, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, has made the relationship of food and faith his bread and butter in recent years, having written several books and lecturing across the country on the topic. “Food is God’s love made delectable,” was the tag line of a talk he gave last fall at Gordon College.

So if food is a biblical focus, it shouldn’t be a surprise that a companion theme—hunger—would surface from time to time. In our text from Deuteronomy, we’re called to think about the hunger the Israelites faced in the 40 year period of their wilderness wanderings. Even more, that such hunger was actually caused by God, not to play a game, but to help his people understand the kind of filling they would need in order to sustain them in the mission to which he had called them. To link this with our theme for the fall, what would they need when the going got tough after they had broken camp and headed into the land of the Canaanites to be a light to the peoples around them? Ultimately, this text will lead us to consider what sustained Jesus when his mission hit a crisis point, and therefore, what is to sustain us as we break camp each and every Sunday and head to work, or school, or just simply into our neighborhoods on Monday.

I. More than Manna in the Wilderness

A. As Moses continues to prepare God’s people to move into the Promised Land, he calls them to look back over the past forty years and do some reflecting and evaluating of this period of their wilderness wandering. It was a wandering, Moses somewhat painfully reminds them, that was caused by God. He is the one who had led them there, and he had led them there, and not directly into the Promised Land, because of their unfaithfulness, their unwillingness to trust what God had for them. The majority report from the spies they had sent into the land said that the going was going to be difficult, that they were like grasshoppers compared to the powerful people who lived there (Nu. 13). And so they wanted to go back to Egypt, to their slavery, instead of trusting that God would sustain them in what he had called them to do.

B. Well, instead of leading them back to Egypt, God had led them to wander in the wilderness. What was this all about? As Moses brings it to mind, he wants them to consider that either this wilderness period was a monumental waste of time, or an incredibly significant learning experience that must never be forgotten. And what we learn is that God had intended it to be the latter, to be a time of humbling, a time of testing, a time of discipline, *for their good*.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . .to teach you that man doesn’t live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. [8:2-3]

What were they to learn? They were to learn that as God met their physical needs during this time, through the daily, miraculous provision of bread from heaven called manna, so would he fill them with all that they would need to be his people and to accomplish his purposes. They were to learn that this time in the wilderness was about more than manna. Manna was just the beginning, just the appetizer if you will. The manna was to give a taste that God could be trusted in all things, that his commands and promises would give life meaning and purpose and shape.

C. What Moses wanted them to see is that they had been led, and were continuing to be led, by a loving Father who desired to fill them in every way. Unlike their ancestors in the Garden of Eden, who had taken this filling into their own hands, eating what God had warned them not to, refusing to be content with what God had given them, and falling to the lie that they could have all the knowledge for life independent of God, the Israelites were being called to trust that this gracious God was with them and would fill them with what he knew they needed, no matter what they faced, no matter how tough the going might get..

II. The Son's Trust in the Father

A. As we ponder this promise, fast forward 1500 or so years to another wilderness experience. This time it's Jesus in the wilderness, for forty days, a period intended to mirror the forty year experience of Israel. Like Israel after they had crossed the Red Sea, Jesus had just been blessed, at his baptism by John, as the Father's beloved Son: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," said the voice from heaven (Ma. 3:17). The designation "Son" was one of both identity and mission. It identified him as the divine Son of the heavenly Father, and his mission as the suffering servant whose call was to give his life for the sin of the world. This Son was then led by God's Spirit out into the wilderness, to hunger, for a time of testing. Do you continue to hear all of the overtones, all of the significant parallels here?!

B And the question put to Jesus was the same as that which was put to Adam and Eve, and then to Israel: "Will you trust me to fill you, to sustain you in this life and in the mission to which I have called you? What kind of Son will you be? Will you be willing to go all the way to the cross?" The question was put to Jesus by the devil in this way: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." This challenge contained the same lie that Satan had begun to spin in the Garden: "God can't be trusted. He is not good. He is holding back something from you. Why be hungry now if a quick miracle can solve the problem? Skip the suffering, skip the cross, fill, and satisfy, yourself." You have to admit that it certainly would have been tempting. Though we don't have the power to turn stones into bread, we do have the power to satisfy ourselves, to go back to Egypt where we think the eating is better, to try and skip the suffering, in a variety of ways, everyday. Will we seek the filling God has for us, or seek to fill ourselves, in our own way?

Illustration: When I was with my parents in NC last week, my sister, father, and I had lunch with a hospice worker that has been meeting regularly with my dad to help him process my mother's several year struggle with Alzheimer's disease. Among other things discussed at that lunch, we were asked if we'd be willing to let hospice to a photo journalism piece on my parent's journey with this disease. Their intent is to use it as a teaching tool to help support and train caregivers. Given that my mother has been a teacher all of her life, it pleased us all to know that her life could, and would, still be used to teach others. In fact my dad said that he had been learning over the past few years what it really means to love "till death do us part." My sister said that her two teenage sons had learned that since their grandmother could no longer entertain them, that they were learning how to lift their eyes off of their cell phones and pay attention to her in order to find ways to try and communicate with and love her.

What is the temptation here? What would many in the world say we should do? They would offer the possibility of an injection, to quickly put an end to the suffering and stop the financial bleeding that are a real part of this situation. But God's call is not to fill and satisfy ourselves as we think best. Instead, it's to trust that he's got us all in his hands and is even still using this situation for his glory, our good, and the good of others. It's to trust that even in, and especially in, the midst of suffering, God is at work.

C. And that's what we see in the experience of Jesus. Where did Jesus turn to help him respond to the temptation to fill and satisfy himself? What would help to undergird the orientation of his life and keep him on the track of the Father's will? He turned to the book of Deuteronomy, which seemed to be one of his favorite parts of scripture to ponder. He turned to the word of God

to help him pierce the fog of Satan's questions and lies and keep him on the path of trust and obedience. And so he responded:

It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." [Ma. 4:4]

Turning a stone to bread might have eased the pressure in the short term, but would not have been helpful in the long run. And so in the wilderness he relied on more than bread. And later, on the cross, when passersby yelled, "If you really are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Ma. 27:40), he remained, staring hunger and fear and suffering in the face, refusing to seek fulfillment apart from the Father's will, trusting that the Father would fill him in the very best way, placing into the Father's hands the satisfaction of his desire. So, can we do that?!

III. Our Trust in the Son

A. Perhaps the answer to that question begins with asking, was the Son's trust in the Father well placed? Was the Father trustworthy, or did the Son trust in vain? If his trust was in vain, we'd best look elsewhere. It all boils down to what happened on the third day. In fact, everything in our life of faith turns on that day. If Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain. If Christ is not raised, God is not to be trusted. If Christ is not raised, we'd best be off to do what we can to fill ourselves, eating and drinking and making merry because tomorrow we will die (cf. 1 Cor. 15). But if Christ is raised, it means there is no hell that we will pass through that Jesus has not experienced, and conquered. If Christ is raised, it means that God is truly with us in all things. If Christ is raised, it means that he holds the key to what life is all about. If Christ is raised, it means that the Father can be trusted to fill us with a banquet that is beyond our wildest imaginings.

B. To get back to food as we approach the table, if Christ is raised, it means that God, as a writer named Christopher West has put it, has turned the food chain on its head (*Fill These Hearts*, 117)! What we expect in a normal food chain is that the little guy dies so that the biggest guy can live. When the "big fish" shows up, we expect to get swallowed alive! But in Jesus, the Big Fish did show up, and this is what he said:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (Jn. 6:35).

Instead of swallowing us, he allowed himself to be swallowed so that we may live. Instead of eating us, he invites us to eat him. As we do so, he wants us to see it as a foretaste of the infinite filling he will provide in the heavenly wedding banquet that is to come. He is the bread of life. Open wide your mouths, he offers, and I will fill it like nothing else, like no one else, can (Ps. 81). He offers to fill us in ways that will give our life meaning and purpose and shape, into eternity. And he promises to sustain us when the going gets tough.