

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Pentecost 19, September 21, 2008, Proper 20, Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1: 21-30; Matthew 20: 1-16

+In the Name of God, the Holy and Life-giving Trinity. Amen.

The first taste of freedom must have been exhilarating. Imagine the joy of freedom after several generations of slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh's army drowned in the Red Sea. The way open to the Promised Land. It was a grand and exciting adventure until the Israelites found themselves in the midst of the fierce, rocky, desolate Sinai wilderness. Then the taste of freedom turned into bitterness. The people complained to their leaders, Moses and Aaron, and listen to what they said, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Suddenly slavery in Egypt looked better than harsh freedom in the Sinai. The people turned on their leaders. If I were God, I would have let them go back to Egypt. But God being God simply says to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you."

Today's story from Exodus is how God provided for the people, ungrateful as they were, in their time of need. God provided a daily portion of a plant secretion called manna. It was enough bread for every day. At the conclusion of the story there is the incident of the quails. Again God provided and the people had meat to eat.

In light of this past week, we could look at the story in a different light. The Israelite enterprise was about to fail. The people had eaten up all their liquid assets. They were in a wilderness barren of capital. God stepped in and provided the biggest bail out in history.

Perhaps the Fed and the Treasury are only doing what they must do. They are not inherently generous institutions. God, on the other hand, is generous. The nature of God's being is to overflow in abundance. The existence of all things is an expression of God's boundless glory and goodness. So, in the parable of Jesus about the laborers who were all rewarded the same amount we come closest to the meaning in the ironic question, "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

God provided not a bail out. God provided food for the journey. That's one very important reason we come to Church. We desire food for the journey. We can't make this trek without nourishment, for some portion of the journey will be through the wilderness.

The psalmist said it:

"They asked, and quails appeared,

And he satisfied them with bread from heaven.

He opened the rock, and water flowed,

So the river ran in the dry places."

Not one of us will make it without the spiritual food and drink that God provides. This is one of those times in our history when we will be acutely aware of how we need and desire God's bread from heaven.

Tom Ehrich is a priest on the staff of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Madison Avenue in New York City. This week as he was walking his son to school, he showed the boy the Wall Street Journal headline, "Crisis on Wall Street." The Fr. Tom explained to his son what possible impact this could have on ordinary lives like theirs. He wrote all this in a weekly newsletter he sends online.

In the newsletter he outlined the steps St. Bart's will take, how they will reach out to their parishioners who work in finance. They will modify their worship to take account of what is

going on. They have an on staff career counselor whose ministry will ramp up. And they will make sure their terrific music concerts are available to all.

Then Fr. Tom wrote: “Most crucial of all, of course, will be our witness as a Christian community of hope and solidarity not only to each other but to our city. [...] Now is when we earn our stripes. Now is when the city needs this church to be open, alive and compassionate, providing moral guidance, tender care and hope in difficult times.

Even though it seems counter-intuitive, now is the time when we need to do more, give more, imagine more. Now is the time to dig deeper as stewards of God’s bounty, and to proclaim with a boldness that many of our neighbors might not feel that ‘it is well with our souls.’”

Tom Ehrich has spoken good words and called the people of St. Bart’s to practice the mission of God to their fellow parishioners and to the entire city of New York. They are well placed on the New York City landscape to be a beacon of hope. I believe they will rise to the call. For they have tasted the bread that the Lord has given them to eat. They are learning to be generous. For as God is so must we be.

The rector of St. Bartholomew’s, Bill Tully, describes his church as “more adventurous and generous than prudence or resources really provide.” He means that they take risks for the sake of the Gospel and to be a vital presence in the city. He waded in on top of what his assistant, Tom Ehrich, wrote. And he asked these questions, “Where do you find security? What or whom do you trust?”

It’s the right time in our lives to ask these questions. It’s the right moment to declare that here within the walls of this church and among the Body of Christ there are resources deeper than any financial institution can ever know. Here is where we find the bread that the Lord has given us to eat. Here is where we can trust that the master of the house is generous beyond all our calculations of work and reward.

And Christ Church, Detroit, is well placed within this troubled city to do everything that God calls us to do. We are stewards of God’s bounty in a time of great uncertainty and anxiety. We a witness to God’s compassion and goodness. Now is the time as Fr. Tom said, “When we earn our stripes. Now is when we step up as the Body of Christ.”