

Sometimes It's Better Not Knowing

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A Tribute to Anna Mae Le Beau

[*The homily begins playfully with a children's sermon, holding a snack called Yogies in my hand.*] Do any of you know what I am holding in my hand? When our oldest son was just about your age, he used to love a snack that came in a pack called *Yogies*. *Yogies* are yogurt covered raisins. It just so happened that Austin didn't like raisins, but he loved *Yogies*. So, his mother and I tried to make a point once about how Austin would probably like raisins if he knew that this snack he loved were actually raisins, not candy. It kind of backfired on us, because once Austin discovered that *Yogies*, which he loved, were actually raisins, which he hated, he wouldn't eat *Yogies* again, not then, not ever. Sometimes it's better not to know what it is that we're eating. Knowing can sometimes take all the delight from the deliciousness we imagine when we're eating something we like.

The First Lesson raises this kind of issue. It's one of my all time favorites, the bread in the wilderness text, manna from heaven, food from God. Our text says it was found on the ground every morning, enough to eat, so that everyone could enjoy one's fill; but it couldn't be saved from one day to the next. It had to be eaten fresh. If you tried to gather it together in baskets, store it in barns, and hoard it for sale, it would go bad, and become rotten like garbage. For example, look at this banana peel I'm holding. The banana, when unpeeled, held up pretty well for several days; but once peeled, you better eat the banana pretty quickly, and then throw away the peel, because they're not going to last. [*I then throw the banana peel in a garbage can.*] That's what happened to the bread in the wilderness if it wasn't eaten immediately. Yesterday's bread became today's garbage.

The account about manna from heaven is a really neat story, which is basically about the invitation to trust God every day for our daily bread. We say it at worship every Sunday with the Lord's Prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread*. That's what happened with the experience of finding bread in the wilderness every morning. It wasn't just about eating a sweet nutritious treat. It was about trusting God to provide what was needed each and every day. Let's face it. This is a great text about a wonderful miracle, and it offers a very important spiritual lesson, too, namely, the lesson of learning to trust God daily.

It turns out that some naturalist discovered something in the natural order of things that may have explained this miraculous account. If you've ever read *Charlotte's Web*, then you know about the wonders of how a spider's secretion, the silk it spins for webs, can become a beautiful pattern, and even words that help Wilbur survive. Speaking about insect secretions, caterpillars secrete a substance that becomes a cocoon, which covers their miraculous transformation into butterflies. Well, it turns out that there is an insect native to the wilderness in which the Israelites wandered, kind of like a moth or butterfly,

which leaves a trail of secretion that can come to look like solid flakes that cover the ground like flakes. You can gather these flakes into baskets, boil or bake them, and make them into cakes, cakes that taste kind of sweet, and they're very nutritious. But don't forget that they are completely organic, and they spoil when saved and hoarded. They become rotten, like garbage, if stored in baskets or barns. After all, we're talking about insect droppings! The Israelites didn't know what it was, but they loved it; and what is more, this manna in the wilderness taught them invaluable lessons about trusting God and sharing what they had with others.

Now, if you're a naturalist or a survivalist, and you're looking for ways to survive when you're lost in the wilderness without any of the foods you might take from home or buy at the store, stories about edible insects and nutritious insect trails could be invaluable to know and fun to eat. But like Austin, and most of us, once the miracle of the manna gets explained as secretions from moth-butterflies, it's hard to go back and long for the days when God gave our ancestors bread from heaven. What we thought was so very sweet, to taste and remember, begins to leave a sour after taste.

Nevertheless, the truth is that this manna from heaven saved Israel's life and taught God's people lessons they couldn't live without. Jesus is trying to teach those same lessons to God's people a thousand years later. It's not about the bread that filled their stomachs. It's about the trust that filled their souls, strengthened their spirits, and sustained their lives. Those are the same lessons we're teaching two thousand years after Jesus taught them. Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and still died. Jesus gives himself to us as the bread of life. If we take in his teachings and digest the truths he offers with his life and his death, we will learn about true life, and not just learn about it, but live it forever because the love with which God loves us never lets us go, and the life God lives and gives us never ends.

These are the lessons that fill this sixth chapter of John, the message that's spun with Jesus' words about his being the true bread from heaven, combined with the promise that those who eat the bread that he gives and taste the wisdom his teachings offer will become filled with true life, God's life, life that never ends. While the wonder of the story of what happened with our ancestors in the wilderness may lose its luster when we get the bird's eye view, so to speak, of insects and the fine meals they may make, literally, we need to focus on the lessons of learning that God provides, learning the disciplines of sharing rather than hoarding, for these are invaluable truths that enrich our lives in countless ways.

The August edition of *The Zion Herald* has a message in it (on page 14), which offers a *thank you* from the Chancel Guild to Anna Mae Le Beau for her life-long service to Zion. They have made her a member for life! "*We would like to thank you for your service,*" they write, "*and let you know that we're thinking of you and praying for you.*" Anna Mae has been in and out of the hospital quite often this past year, and she's in the hospital now. It's been quite a role reversal for Anna Mae, this legendary nurse, who taught so

many nurses their craft over the years, has now become a patient; and she has been a model patient at that! It really is amazing. She does what she's asked, takes her medicine as directed, partly because she knows how important it is to have patients who trust their doctors and nurses, and partly because she actually trusts her caregivers in their desire to care, and, God willing, to cure.

It's amazing she's survived the many maladies she's suffered of late. What a resilient spirit she's displayed! The medical prognosis has, at times, been quite scary, sufficient to depress even a strong soul and diehard optimist. But Anna Mae is not just an optimist. She's a believer, and there's a difference. Her faith is not in herself, but in the Good News that Jesus is the Christ. Anna Mae may be optimistic, but it isn't her optimism, but God's grace that she trusts. When you stand in her presence, it is so very apparent that she believes what Paul recounts when speaking about God's love and faithfulness in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you." She practices this trust, one day at a time, with each challenge she encounters, on a daily basis, moment by moment, always careful never to get ahead of herself. It's so apparent when you see her turning problems into challenges to trust God, turning obstacles into opportunities to overcome, whether it's overcoming evil with good, fear with faith, fear about the present we're forced to endure with faith in the future God promises, in the strength God gives to hearts that are open to His help, to lives that are open to the love God gives through His Son, through our family, through our friends.

Those who don't know Anna Mae well may think of her as a quiet woman – and she's certainly all of that, and more. She is not one to speak out of line; but I have found that whenever she speaks, I learn an awful lot about Zion and about God. Mostly, I learn a whole lot about all the trusting in God that's gone on for a long, long time here at Zion. Last night, for instance, she was recounting how over the years she was the nurse on hand at the birth of twenty-four of Zion's members. It's not something you often hear, and I had to stop and think about it, to think about what it meant, how across the generations, her friends, their children, and even grandchildren have known Anna Mae as a loving, supportive presence since *their very first breath*.

There must be a great lesson here about God and Baptism, and a lesson about the community that celebrates Baptism. All I could think about when I thought about what Anna Mae said was what love lives here across the generations, this place of worship and service, with friends simply trying to help other friends believe in the grace of God and trust the good will of their neighbors. Learning how to trust God's love and one another: these are both miracles and necessities in life. Jesus wants us to learn these lessons. He wants us to know the joy that comes when we trust in God's goodness, and to live this trust through sharing God's gifts with others. He wants us to live this trust by learning to turn God's grace into forgiveness, by learning to turn God's love into service. That's the key to true life, the life Jesus promises, the life we discover alive within us and among us as we learn to live each day, one day at a time ... in Jesus' Name. Amen