

A LENTEN JOURNEY: NOURISHMENT ALONG THE WAY

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Today we take the third leg of our Lenten journey. As I have pointed the last two Sundays, Lent is a journey with multiple dimensions.

- Lent is **a liturgical journey** from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week. This journey begins with the cross traced on our foreheads with palm ash to the palms begin waved to shouts of “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday.
- Lent is also a **scriptural journey**, one which begins with the story of Jesus preparing for his ministry in the wilderness and ends with the fulfillment of his ministry in Jerusalem.
- Lent is also a **spiritual journey**. As a spiritual journey, we are invited to take a journey through prayer, fasting and almsgiving that help draw us into a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

One of the things I enjoy most on vacations is taking walks or hikes. I enjoy walking along the edge of the oceans, and along the shores of lakes. I enjoy walking on trails through woods or on mountains. I find such journeys to be calming to my spirit and having a centering effect on my soul. And occasionally, especially if the trail is challenging and strenuous, these journeys can be good for body and mind.

An important thing to ask before taking any journey is the question: “will I need any food or water for this journey?” If all I am doing is taking a walk through a nearby forest preserve, I probably will not going to need to take any food or water. But if I am taking a hike up to Flattop Mountain, in Colorado, then I should take plenty of water and food with me. It is important to remain nourished in order to maintain the level of energy needed for such a journey.

In our First Lesson for today we read these words:

*“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1)*

This is one of many passages throughout scriptures that use the imagery of food and nourishment to describe some aspect of our journey in relationship to God. In our passage from Isaiah 55, God is inviting the thirsty to taste the water and the hungry to taste wine, milk and bread. It is nourishment that comes without cost. The Lord asks:

*For why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,*

and delight yourself in rich food.”

(Isaiah 55:2)

In the passages that follow, we come to understand that these words really don't have anything to do with real food. For in verse three we read, "incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast love, sure love for David."

"Listen carefully to me," the Lord says, *"Listen so that you may live."* When we listen to the Lord, when we understand what the Lord desires for our lives, when we open ourselves up to his word, the result of this relationship with God is life, abundant life. We are invited to experience the garden once again. To those wandering in the wilderness of life this is good news. Who wouldn't want to experience the joy and abundance that is ours when we live in covenant with God.

We realize through these words of Isaiah that true nourishment comes from a covenantal relationship with God. A covenant is an agreement of relationship. A covenant between two people spells out what their relationship will be and what benefits the two parties will receive as a result of that relationship. A covenant spells out what the consequences will be if the agreed upon relationship is broken. God establishes of relationship Noah and Abraham in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus says: ***"Take and drink for this is the new covenant in my blood."*** All are statements of relationship.

When we live in covenant with God we are able to experience the abundant life that Jesus promises to us. Yet sadly, many of us do not experience that abundant life. Many choose not to go down this path of life. Many are enticed by other paths, which at first seem to offer abundance, but in the end do not. But we are encouraged, even urged, to walk the path that truly nourishes us. In Isaiah 55:6 we read, *"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."*

In our Psalm we hear the testimony of one who decided to walk down the right path. The psalmist compares the depth of his need for this relationship with God to the intensity of thirst in the midst of a desert. So out of this need he turns his face towards God, seeking, in his words, to gaze upon the Lord in God's holy place, to behold God's power and glory. The seeker knows that the relationship with God is better than anything that ordinary life has to offer. And so, the psalmist says, *"My lips shall give you praise. And I will bless you as long as I live. And I will lift up my hands in your name."*

And finally, he says, *"My spirit is content, as with the richest of fine foods, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips."* Another translation of this passage reads: *"My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips."*

I can remember as a child, how my mother used to cook certain cuts of meat that still had a portion of the bone in the middle. And in the middle of the bone was the

marrow, which contained all of best juices of the cut of meat. And my brothers and sisters used to fight over who would get the piece with the bone in the middle, so that we could suck out all of the juices.

Nowadays we don't eat as much meat. But there are many foods that I love just as much; foods that cause my mouth to water just to think of them. This desire and contentment, says the psalmist, describes the way his soul longs for God, and how he is nourished and satisfied when he is in relationship with God.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we are told a parable about a fig tree planted in a vineyard. No matter what the owner does, he cannot get that fig tree to bear fruit. He threatens to cut it down, for what good is a fig tree without fruit. The gardener, however, encourages him to let him try one more year, during which he will dig around it and put manure on it. Manure is the substance which provides nourishment to the tree. The expectation then, is that having been nourished, the tree will produce the fruit.

In this story, you and I are the fig tree. You and I are expected to bear fruit. You and I are expected to live in a covenantal relationship with God through Jesus. Because of that relationship, you and I are expected to live lives transformed by God's grace. Lives that are transformed by God's grace become agents of God's grace to others. That is what it means to bear fruit: Just as our lives are nourished by the love and grace of Jesus Christ, so too should we help lead others to that nourishment. Lives that are nourished experience see and experience God's abundance all around us.

Jesus constantly shows us how to find such nourishment.

- We are nourished when we take time to pray.
- We are nourished when we gather together for worship.
- We are nourished through the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist.
- We are nourished when we listen to God and read his words to us in scripture.
- We are nourished when we seek out healthy relationships with others who desire to live in a covenantal relationship with God.
- We are nourished when we reach out in compassion to others.
- We are nourished when we give of our time, our talents and our treasures, so that others might also be nourished.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.