

A Golden Urn Holding the Manna

Hebrews 9:1-16; John 6:30-40

Of course, Advent is a season when everyone is thinking about gifts. One can only be impressed with how thoroughly the season of Jesus' birth has become focused around gifts and gift giving. Just a few weeks ago, our Sunday School sent more than seventy shoe-box-size gift packages to children all over the world. And the point of sending children boxes full of colorful socks and hats and hair bands and toys is less about the fun and usefulness of what's inside, and more about the notion that someone far away was thinking and caring and wanting to do something for you.

Much of the warmth and power of a gift comes from the heart of the giver. Really gifts are as much about who loves you and wants to see you happy, as they are about what you got and what you own. And it got me thinking about the fact that, way back in the days of Moses, before God sent his people packing on their way through the desert toward the Promised Land he gave the Israelites a gift box, all wrapped in gold.

It was called the Ark of the Covenant and it would gradually fill up with gifts from God through all the years that Moses and God's people had wandered through the desert and toward the Promised Land. According to our Call to Worship, the first item God packed in the Ark, the first gift he wanted us to think about was "*a golden urn filled with manna*".

The Hebrew word "manna" literally means "What is it?", which is exactly what God's people said when they saw it. It was only a few days after crossing the Red Sea, when it began to dawn on the Israelites that there was no food out here and no way to grow food in a desert when you're constantly on the move. And their first reaction to the hunger pains in Exodus 16 was to blame Moses and to wish they were back in Egypt on slave rations.

And God's reaction to this first crisis of confidence in the wilderness was to supply a sort of floury powder that condensed out of the morning dew which would fall on the rocks and shrubs near the Israelite encampment. So God's people gathered the manna and Moses was inspired to tell them that they could sift and water and roll the flour out in pans to make a sort of sweet bread that became the staple of their diet in all the years they were in the desert.

And once the people understood they were not going to starve, God told Moses to take a gold jar of the stuff and place it among the gifts in the Ark so that, whenever they worshiped him, God's people would remember that this was a God who could feed them, even at times and in places and in ways that they couldn't feed themselves. Because one of features of human nature is that we are prone to forget how good he is once the crisis is over.

So for all the centuries Israel was in the Promised Land, they kept manna in the Ark to remind themselves that here was a God who would feed you if ever you become weak and faint and unable to complete the journey. And the gift worked because, more than a thousand years after

God gave Moses manna in the desert for his people, Jesus led another crowd of Israelites out into the desert and Jesus fed five thousand of them from single rucksack when they became weak and faint and unable to complete the journey.

And, once they were all back in town, they confronted Jesus wanting more, wanting better, because the problem with manna flour and bread from a rucksack is that it's only good so long as the miracle keeps happening, so long as the Wonder Worker is still there. But Jesus was preparing the disciples for a day after the Cross and after the Grave, when Jesus would rise from the dead and return to the Father in heaven. Who would feed us then, who will help when we grow weak and faint and unable to complete the journey?

And the answer is that the manna God gave Moses in the desert and the bread Jesus multiplied for the disciples was about more than us just getting our bellies filled when we get hungry. The point of the gift in the box and the point of the miracle for the five thousand was that God is a Father and Jesus is a Savior who can help us through whatever it is makes us weak and faint and unable to complete the journey.

Because, more often than not, it really isn't about flour and bread and physical hunger pangs. More often, it about not being able to find love or give love. Our relationships get in such a tangle and our hearts get so bent and broken that we can't feed our souls, can't hold on to Christ and gospel and church and family. And it is then that God shows us the manna in the box and the Savior at table lifting and breaking and offering us whatever it is we need to give us strength and focus and direction to complete the journey.

Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will not hunger, he who believes in me will never thirst...All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never, ever cast out...He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.* Again, the point being that this is about more than food, this is about Christ being there to feed and help and heal and guide whenever we're weak and faint and unable to get ourselves home.

Our job is to remember and believe and come to him early and often.