

## *Bread/ Love*

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“I have heard the complaining of the people of Israel; say to them, ‘At twilight, in the evening, you will eat meat and in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am *Yahweh*, I am your God.’” — Exodus 16:12.

Those of you who have been around Chenango County for a while at least know the name Bruce MacDuffie. He is an Episcopal priest who served churches up and down this valley for quite some time. Bruce and I first met twenty plus years ago when, together, we attended an event in Syracuse, a day long class offered by the New Testament scholar Nicholas Thomas Wright.

The Rev. MacDuffie still does occasionally visit this neck of the woods. I think the last time I saw him was about a year ago. But most of the time is now found serving a church in Westminster, Vermont.

These days there is a downside and an upside when people move away. The downside: we don't see them often. The upside: we keep track of them on Facebook.

And so last week Bruce had a Facebook entry which referred to the current PBS Ken Burns series on Vietnam. This is some of what he said. (Slight pause.)

I had no enthusiasm for further examining this sad patch of history and its ignorant misuse of power. A heart murmur exempted me from the draft, but at that stage, age 19, I was, idealistically, willing to do my part for the country.... Well, I now have, indeed, watched the first four episodes of the production. It is a great piece of work. [1] (Slight pause.)

Bruce has a couple of years in age on me but we are out of the same era. And, as most of you know, I did serve in Vietnam. But his immediate reaction was similar to mine. I had no enthusiasm for further examining this sad patch of history and the ignorant misuse of power.

Further, I often am either puttering on my computer or watching baseball at the time the series is being broadcast. This is relax time, personal time for me. So, to squeeze in watching a ten episode, 18 hour series that I might have to concentrate on and think about into my relax time is not something I was interested in doing.

But, on the second night of the series, I did stumble across it as I flipped through channels. I was doing other things so I could not watch continuously, but it did catch my eye and my interest.

Despite watching sporadically and watching only one part of one segment, right away I agreed with Bruce's assessment: it is a great piece of work. Now, even though I was only able to watch only in small bits and pieces in thirty odd minutes of sporadic watching I saw two items to which I immediately related.

One, something of which I had personal experience, was a description, narrated by a veteran, of a mission on a helicopter. You take off, get some altitude and once you're out of a populated area or a base camp, a chopper dives low over the rice patties, bumps up higher to cross any hills or get over trees, and then zooms back down to about five or ten feet above the fields.

The flight crew is trying to do one of two things: spot Viet Cong and go after them or draw fire from Viet Cong

and invite them reveal their position and go after them. (Slight pause.) For me, it was riveting because I was listening to another GI describe that experience in plain, straightforward language the way I would have described it.

I saw a second thing with which I also had some personal experience. The program showed a film clip taken in the streets of downtown Saigon, one block from the National Assembly Building.

When I was first in Vietnam I was stationed two blocks from the National Assembly Building. Hence, my reaction to seeing this scene was, “I know every building in that shot.”

At that point I did not hesitate. I ran to my computer and ordered the series on DVD. I have not even opened the box yet, but I know I need to watch it. I also know I will need to devote my attention to it and really focus on it as I fit it into my schedule. I don’t yet know when that will be but I know I need to do it. (Slight pause.)

In a sermon just a couple of weeks ago I mentioned I did some soul searching when I got back from Vietnam. Part of that exercise was asking the question, ‘why had I survived when better than 50,000 of us did not?’

While I thank God every day for my safe return, there is only one thing I know for certain about the fact that I did come back. It is totally wrong— not merely inappropriate but totally wrong— to say God favored me.

Why is it wrong to say something like that? The implication is God wanted better than 50,000 G.I.s dead. I don’t think so. (Slight pause.)

We hear these words in the work known as Exodus: “I have heard the complaining of the people of Israel; say to them, ‘At twilight, in the evening, you will eat meat and in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am *Yahweh*, I am your God.’” (Slight pause.)

The story of the miraculous feeding of the Israelites portrays God as zealous for the people of Israel. Hence, the question the very details of the reading poses is simple. Are the actions portrayed meant to be merely about welfare or is there something else going on? (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest the story about miraculous food is not about food. It is about a witness to liberation, the freedom *Yahweh*, God, offers and a witness to the presence of *Yahweh*, God.

You see, the following words refer to liberation, the freedom offered by God, and they are found in verse 7 (quote:): “...it was *Yahweh* Who brought you out of Egypt,...” These next words refer to the presence of God and they are found in verse 10 (quote:): “...they looked toward the desert, the wilderness, and there the *kabod* of God, the glory of *Yahweh*, appeared in the form of a cloud.”

Let me address that Hebrew word *kabod*. It is often translated as “glory.” But that’s because there is no equivalent in English. In one sense it means the presence of God. But there is more to *kabod* than that. *Kabod* also means a manifestation of God, hence the reference to the cloud.

I need to be clear on this count. Contrary to populist modern concepts, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Christian Scriptures, the work we commonly call the Bible, the presence of God, a manifestation of God, is always— *always*— seen as a pretty frightening experience. (Slight pause.)

All that brings me back to what was said when this reading was introduced. The word manna means “what is it?” [2] I think this purposeful verbal skewing, this word play, is a meaningful key to the reading and to the

story.

You see, using word play to refer to the flakes of something— this fine substance, delicate, powdery, as fine as frost— using word play lets us know to not take the bread and meat pictured too seriously, too literally. Does God provide? Yes, God provides.

But what is it God actually provides? Manna— “what is it?” This points us toward a deep truth. God provides liberation, freedom. God provides presence. Therefore, God provides love and God walks with us, no matter what happens because God loves us.

Hence, this is not a passage about who eats and who does not eat. This is not a passage about winning and losing. This is a passage about the constant, real presence of God, the love God offers, a passage about liberation, the freedom God offers, a passage about God who walks with us.

One clear reason I say this is a passage about the constant presence of God, God who walks with us, is scholars agree that manna, this “what is it,” does not stop until the Israelites enter Canaan. The manna does not stop for forty years. Therefore, this *is* about the constant, real presence of God, the love God offers, liberation and God who walks with us. (Slight pause.)

I have probably said this on Sunday mornings a couple hundred times. Here is another way to put the idea which says this passage is about the constant, real presence of God, the love God offers, liberation, freedom, God who walks with us.

God loves us and wants to covenant with us. *God loves us and wants to covenant with us.* What more is there to say? Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Earlier I stated I was quite sure God did not want better than 50,000 G.I.s to die. All that comes down to is winners and losers. People do say winning and losing is up to God. Indeed, this is a claim made by American theology. For example, when a baseball player, a football player says they won because God helped them, that expresses American theology. It says someone wins and someone loses because God wanted it. That does not express Christian theology. Christian theology says God loves everyone. Winning and losing is not part of the love everybody equation. The love God has for us is a constant, real presence. God walks with us. And God walks with everyone.”

BENEDICTION: God surprises us. Let us trust God and give thanks. Let us seek God’s will. And may the blessing of the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Jesus born of our sister Mary, the one who is the Christ, and the Holy Spirit who broods over the world as a mother hen over chicks, be upon us and remain with us always. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.

[1] These words posted on Facebook are slightly edited for this context.

[2] This is what was said when the reading from Exodus was introduced:

The word manna, especially when tied to the phrase “bread from heaven” is a part of our language. That

specific word is not used in this translation, despite the fact that this is the passage in which the word manna might be used. Why? At the end of this reading the Israelites refer to the substance commonly called manna and ask this question: “What is it?” In Hebrew the question “What is it?” is two words: *mahn* and *hu*. These two words, when playfully slurred together, sound like *manna*. Hence, in the original Hebrew this is a bit of word play, a little like when we say “whatisit” all slurred together in English. Indeed and obviously, that is exactly what word manna means: “whatisit.”