

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
August 1, 2021
18th Sunday of Year B Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15; John 6: 24-35

The British poet, Philip Larkin, once wrote that everyone's life can be characterized as having "a beginning, a muddle and an ending." That is probably true enough, that we muddle through life, simply putting one foot in front of the other, without much drama, without much heroism, just trying to get by from day to day. Today's first reading from the book of Exodus can serve as a metaphor for the pressures and strains of everyday life. It is the story of God leading the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to deliverance, to freedom in a Promised Land, delineating all the trials and tribulations they faced along the way. Nonetheless, there are parallels, there are allusions, to the way in which each of us has to muddle, has to make our way, through life. More importantly, the Hebrews' going out from Egypt shows the struggles that one faces, if he or she is willing to accept a truly spiritual, more than just a materialist, approach to life.

The Chinese philosopher, Lao-tse, said, "a thousand mile journey begins with a single step." That first step can be the most difficult of all the steps in the journey—the commitment to the task at hand, a willingness to take on the responsibility of getting started. So, it was for the Hebrews, and so it can be for any one of us. We sometimes forget what a difficult job Moses had in trying to persuade his kinsman that it was worth the effort to take this chance on freedom. Not only did Moses have to convince the Pharaoh to let God's people go, but he had the equally daunting task of trying to convince the Hebrews to make a run for it. Many no doubt believed that the journey Moses was asking them to undertake was a fool's errand into the wilderness. Better to stay put.

All of life holds these same possibilities for liberation, adventure, discovery, openness to challenge, for moving beyond the constraints of the past—letting go of one's fantasies and fears, resentments and grudges, dependencies and disappointments. That journey through the wilderness is depicted as taking so many, many years for the Hebrews, because for the victims of abuse—and the Hebrews were certainly abused as slaves—it's going to take a long, long time to get over that experience—to move beyond a "victim mentality" to be free, self-sustaining and healed. A spiritual approach to life entails the courage, the willingness to achieve a certain degree of integrity, moral character, of wisdom, of wholeness, of holiness.

For the Hebrews there was a great deal of looking back, all the while that God

was trying to lead them forward. We read in today's passage of the Hebrews grumbling that "maybe we should have stayed in Egypt after all, at least there we weren't in danger of starving to death." You may have heard of the expression, "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know," i.e., that some very difficult situation in life, as troubling as it may be, also has its attractions, its allure, its compensations, if you will. Because as terrible as that situation may be, to some degree the one abused has learned to cope with it over time, to put up with it, to live with it. He or she may think they know how to handle it. To try to move beyond it, to embrace a new, healthier, a more realistic approach to life, will demand having to learn a whole new approach, a new set of coping skills, and that can be rather daunting, even terrifying. One may see "light at the end of the tunnel," but one may still not have the resolve, the courage, the determination, to head towards it. No wonder people are willing to remain stuck in all sorts of abusive, even self-destructive situations, rather than then take the first step to become free. Still, the Book of Exodus shows how all along the journey, all along the way, God supports, sustains His people by providing for their needs with this strange, miraculous food called "manna." God is not very far from them at all, all the while that they, that we, are on the journey.

In today's Gospel people come looking to Jesus for more of the bread that last Sunday we saw Him providing on the mountainside. These people are situated in a materialist, physical approach to life, while Jesus is trying to lead them to one that is more open, more in touch with the realm of the Spirit. They say to Jesus, why don't you do for us what Moses did for our ancestors, namely provide for their material needs. To which Jesus responds that it was not Moses who gave (past tense) bread from heaven, but God who gives (present tense), continues to give the bread that gives life to the world, and Jesus is that bread of life. Jesus is the One Who connects to God who is the Source of a fuller, deeper, richer life.

Some of you may remember the old Latin hymn, "O Esca Viatorum," which means, "Food of Wayfarers," "Food for Those on a Journey." It refers to the risen Jesus present in the Eucharist. So, wherever we stand in the journey of life, more towards the beginning, more towards the ending, or in the muddle—and truth be told, it's mostly a muddle, let us go on with the confidence that it is that risen Jesus who sustains us every step along the way, bringing us to wholeness, to holiness, to genuine freedom and liberation from the prisons of the past.