

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Year B, Proper 14
John 6, Psalm 78
August 13, 2024

Craving for Christ

Before you begin your mid-sermon nap today, I'd like for us to do a little exploring together. I would like for us to take a look into the Book of Psalms. The Psalms are the first prayer book of the Church and they have a way of reading us as we read them. So, do me a favor now and grab a Book of Common Prayer from your pew there. It's that red book which won't go away. In the middle of the Book of Common Prayer, we find the Psalter. Turn to page 696, to Psalm 78. (Page 696, Psalm 78).

This Psalm is the story of the Exodus: God liberating the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and how God led them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. There are a few psalms like this and they were meant to help people remember who they are, who their God is, and how God has chosen them and liberated them.

Look at verse 14 on the top of page 696,

- 14 He led them with a cloud by day, *
and all the night through with a glow of fire.
- 15 He split the hard rocks in the wilderness *
and gave them drink as from the great deep.
- 16 He brought streams out of the cliff, *
and the waters gushed out like rivers.
- 17 But they went on sinning against him, *
rebellious in the desert against the Most High.
- 18 They tested God in their hearts, *
demanding food for their craving.
- 19 **They railed against God and said, ***
"Can God set a table in the wilderness?"

- 20 True, he struck the rock, the waters gushed out, and
the gullies overflowed; *
but is he able to give bread or to provide meat for his
people?"
- 21 When the LORD heard this, he was full of wrath; *
a fire was kindled against Jacob,
and his anger mounted against Israel;
- 22 For they had no faith in God, *
nor did they put their trust in his saving power.
- 23 So he commanded the clouds above *
and opened the doors of heaven.
- 24 He rained down manna upon them to eat *
and gave them grain from heaven.
- 25 So mortals ate the bread of angels; *
he provided for them food enough.
- 26 He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens *
and led out the south wind by his might.
- 27 He rained down flesh upon them like dust *
and wingèd birds like the sand of the sea.
- 28 He let it fall in the midst of their camp *
and round about their dwellings.
- 29 **So they ate and were well filled, ***
for he gave them what they craved.
- 30 **But they did not stop their craving, ***
though the food was still in their mouths.

Think about verse 30. Let's hear it again: **"So they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. But they did not stop their craving, though the food was still in their mouths."**

Part of being a human being is that we get cravings! We get hungry! We long for things that we do not have or for more of what we already have. It never ceases to amaze me about how our

cravings can rule us. And how we think that if we are given this one thing that we really want, then we will be satisfied. We hunger for so many things. And this is true for us as a nation; it's true for us as a Church; and it's true for us as individuals.

Today we heard the story of King David being at war with his own son, Absalom. Last week it was David having Uriah killed because he longed for Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. But months ago, we heard the beginning of this story. It was way back, all the way back in 1 Samuel 8. David was still a shepherd boy back then.

The people of God went to Samuel and they said

“Give us a king! We want to be like all the other nations!”

God responds, “But I'm your king.”

“Well, yeah, sort of,” the people reply, “But we want someone who is more like Sylvester Stallone in Rambo. You know, someone who can fight our battles for us.”

God says, “This is a really bad idea. This king is going to own you.”

“But everyone else has a king!”

God says, “So be it.”

Sometimes God gives us exactly what we want and yet our cravings do not stop, even though the food is still in our mouths.

I think about this same question for us as a nation during an election year. What is it that we are really longing for? I'll never forget realizing during one election cycle as election night played out and seeing some people so elated and others so disappointed, dreams realized by some and hopes dashed for others. What I realized then was that so many of us place all of this energy, all of this angst, all of these expectations into our national politics because we are looking for someone to save us. We hunt for a messiah most desperately when we forget that we have one already.

And in our lives, we also have these cravings and longings as individuals. They often say more about us than about the thing for which we long. We think that if we have that one nice thing, then we'll be ok. Just a newer car, or a nicer kitchen, or if you're going back to school it may be about the clothing being just right or not wanting to be embarrassed by your parents or siblings. We crave so many things.

But there's more to it because, like the people of Israel in the desert, our longings can even appear good on the surface, can't they?

"Come on God, we are in the desert for you, can't you set a table for us in the wilderness? Sure you gave us water to drink, but what about bread? We are hungry for bread!" So mortals ate the bread of angels, but it wasn't enough. Next they said to God, "Now we want to eat meat. Bread from heaven was nice, but can you give us meat to eat? We are hungry down here!"

Parents can become obsessive over their kids' education and their future so easily. How can they get into the best school if they don't get ahead now. Stories of parents contacting Harvard asking for advice on how their third grader can begin preparing for the Ivy League are hilarious, and yet they speak to these longings and fears we have as parents.

Our longings for security lead us to purchase cameras for our homes, our work, and our cars. We arm ourselves and alarm ourselves, thinking that we cannot be vulnerable to attack or to criminality. So neighbors view each other skeptically. Other drivers become people who are out to get us. People who don't look like us or talk like us are threats to our lifestyles. We might take caution, because God may just give us what we want: greater safety, with walls around every home, security could be everywhere. No need for kids to play outside or walk to school; it's too dangerous. No need to talk to someone we have a disagreement with; it's too volatile.

In Psalm 106, we find a very similar passage to Psalm 78 that we just read. And there the psalmist writes – this is Psalm 106:15 – **“God gave them what they asked for but sent leanness into their souls.”** God might just give us what we crave, what we want, what are appetites demand, but in so doing, he'll send leanness into our souls. Sometimes God gives us exactly what we ask for. Sometimes God gives us exactly what we deserve and we get leanness in our souls. Our cravings continue, even though the food is still in our mouths.

And then at other times, God doesn't do this, because grace is getting the goodness that we don't deserve. When we turn to our Gospel reading this morning, it's still about our cravings, our wants, and our longings. And here all of those broken prayers and appetites of the flesh are revealed to us as surface-level desires when coming into contact with Jesus Christ. When we meet King Jesus, we find one who has rejected political power and opportunity at every turn and yet has real authority. His throne is a cross. His crown is made of thorns. And our longings for someone to save us and to lead us are unmasked by one who is serving, one who is listening, one who is sacrificing, one who is truly loving.

Our deep hunger for material comforts, for food to eat, for actual belonging are transformed when we meet the one who gives us – not what we want or deserve – but what we need deep inside of us.

“I’m hungry, God. I’m starving here! I’m thirsty! I need something to drink,” we demand. And in Jesus, we don’t just find a meal and a drink. **We find the bread of life. We find the cup of salvation. We find that living water from whom we drink and are never thirsty again!** So turn to him. Bring to him all of your cravings. Show him the leanness of your soul. Get in line with Israelites long ago who craved in the desert, of kings and politicians who maneuvered for power, and but now put out your hands like a confused beggar before your friend, Savior, and King.

Remember now what he said: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.” Jesus said, “I am the bread that comes down from heaven, so that you can eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven who satisfies our cravings. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Amen.