

Dancing with the Darkness

I don't think I have ever eaten food so good that I would court death just to taste it one last time. But if I had to identify something I have eaten that was *just so phenomenal*, it would be a piece of carrot cake from a small, hole-in-the wall restaurant in Nashville, TN. I can't remember the name of the place, but I can remember the way the cinnamon was mixed so perfectly into the cake. Just enough carrots. The cream cheese icing was a subdued addition, not overpowering. It was, in a word, perfect. But I wouldn't die for it. So, at first glance, I can't quite understand or fully empathize with the Israelites in their complaining. Certainly, I can appreciate how a life-threatening hunger may bring on a desperation like nothing else. I can understand how that kind of hunger could cause someone to wish for death, to long for it even, right then-and-there, in the place of their hunger. But I can't quite understand how the Israelites would rather return to Egypt, the place of their slavery and torment, just to escape the hunger pains they were facing in the desert. What's required, perhaps, is a bit of creativity and charity as we meditate on the plight of the Israelites. It's easy to chastise them for their complaining, their murmuring, but that's a kind of superficial reaction to the story. Maybe there was something more going on within the congregation. Rather than seeing them primarily as misguided and unfaithful characters in an ancient story, let's see them as equally human as we see ourselves, and take a moment to think about how often in our own lives, fear drives us to imagine and engage in desperate behaviors. Then, perhaps, it becomes a bit easier to understand their plight.

This is a people who lived for so long on so little...who suffered violently under a cruel system. A people who may have felt forgotten by their God during their years of slavery. So when another crisis occurred, they may have slipped away from this new place of security with

God and back into a state of fear and hopelessness, echoes of their previous enslavement. What *desperation* they must have been feeling, what absolute abandonment they must have been imagining themselves staring into...what utter 'lost-ness' that must have overcome them in order for them to long for the chains of slavery and death just to taste again the fleshpots and bread of Egypt. It's almost impossible for me to truly enter into their story because I have never known such hunger. I have always been well fed. Never have I had to go without food or water. Instead, like many Americans, I have the luxury of eating food which does absolutely nothing for my health if that which is healthy I find to be 'unsavory' to my palate. And since I've become accustomed to a lifestyle of 'being full', perhaps I too would have 'complained' or 'murmured' if I had been taken away from a place of *relative* normalcy, replete with food, and led blindly into a wilderness of hunger, where water was bitter and there was not even a hint of something as basic as bread. So, I suppose, I can empathize with the Israelites.

But even more than in just their hunger, I can empathize and identify with the Israelites in their seeming inability to trust the very God who delivered them from slavery and death. Before I stand at a distance, separated by thousands of years, and judge a people for being fickle, fearful, and faithless in the face of hunger's impending doom, it's only fair to admit my own failings and inability to trust. All too often, like Israel, I have been overcome by something other than trust in God. These are the very same people who were passed over by the Angel of Death, who were led out of Egypt by an angel of God in a pillar of cloud, who walked on dry land, dry land through the Red Sea, the waters standing like walls on their right side and their left. Yet, even as they witnessed nature's laws turned upside down, something blocked them from imagining that God could deliver them from their hunger. They bore witness to marvels and miracles, and yet they couldn't see past their empty stomachs and the ensuing desperation. But, in a way, this is

my story too. I am a man who has dedicated his life serving the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who has given myself over to the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, who has seen firsthand how God can take people from deep darkness and gloom and set them ablaze with joy and passion. But even I sometimes cannot see past my own anxiety and depression.

You see, depression and anxiety have become close friends of mine. I developed a kind of anxiety disorder when I was working as a chaplain, encountering painful and tragic deaths nearly every day I served. After a while, what I experienced got to me, got in me somehow, and to ameliorate the feelings, I was prescribed 20mg of a helpful little anti-depressant called Celexa. I've tried to taper off of the medicine, but I now realize that my baseline isn't what it used to be. So I still take it. I also come from a family where depression runs back generations, and sometimes I feel its shadow overtake me. Sometimes, these feelings become so strong, so palpable, that I can't see past them, see through them. I get stuck, and sometimes, rather than turning to prayer and meditation, which I know will help me, I remain there, the sunlight of joy feeling just out of my reach.

As it's Suicide Prevention Month, I decided to out myself as someone who struggles with depression, to help put a human face to this problem. Depression is an equal opportunity destroyer, and clergy are in no way immune to its claws. I know what it's like to wish for death to escape my problems, as I was only one day away from taking my own life when I was younger. To anyone here who struggles with depression, or despair, or anxiety, or the feeling that the world would be better off without you...you are not alone, and you are not damaged beyond repair, and dealing with feelings like this does not make you sinful. We're human, after all, strong in some ways and fragile in others. And whether or not you deal with some kind of depression, all of us, in ways small or large, know just how easy it is to focus so narrowly on our

struggles that we almost forget there even is a God desiring to comfort us in our affliction. In my most depressed moments, I am an Israelite in the wilderness, complaining and murmuring, not able to see beyond the struggle. And it would be all too easy to marvel at my pain, and to marvel at the pain and unfaithfulness of Israel time and time again...to marvel at human stubbornness, fear, or anxiety in the face of God's miracles. But that ultimately does very little to get me out of the pit, and frankly, I would rather marvel at something else.

I'd rather marvel at the God who is absolutely and unfailingly faithful to us despite our sometime inability to grasp the goodness and comfort of God. That is something worth marveling at. Despite their complaints, despite their frustrations, despite their apparent inability to trust in God's miracles, the LORD said to Moses, *"I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day...At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God."* How easy it would have been for the LORD to say, *"Do you not remember that I led you out of Egypt, and that by my hand the waters stood on your right side and your left? In that way you shall know that I am the LORD your God."* How easy it would have been for the LORD to reject the complaints of the congregation. Instead, Moses commanded Aaron to bring such sweet and wonderful words as these to the people: *"Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining."* Rejection was within the LORD's power. Chastisement, too. And yet, the LORD chose to bless the people...to give them meat and bread. And it is not just any bread, but a bread like no other. It was manna, what we've come to call the bread of angels. When all is said and done, God's grace and favor to an apprehensive and broken people is what is worth marveling at.

The God of Israel, the God we have come to know in the face of Jesus Christ, is so

passionate about his beloved children that he couldn't abide their remaining overcome by a spirit of despair and fear. That's the beauty of the God we serve. Even when we have nothing left to give, even when we are running of the last remaining fumes in our tank, God takes the initiative, reaches out to us, shows us that we have worth, and value, and blesses us beyond what we can imagine. Apprehensive and fearful as they were, God was faithful to Israel. Apprehensive and fearful as we may be, as depressed and despairing as we may be, as broken beyond repair as we may think we are, God is faithful to us.