Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“I cannot carry all this people by myself; they are too heavy for me” (Numbers 11:14).

Nm 11:4b-15; Matt 14:13-21

Can it really be almost 70 years ago that I was being prepared for my first Holy Communion? The second graders were escorted into church to rehearse, and we were given an unconsecrated host to taste and practice swallowing so there would be no incidents the following Sunday, like someone getting the host stuck to the roof of his or her mouth and prying it loose with a finger. The reaction of one of my classmates to the small, tasteless wafer was to say aloud what the Israelites in the desert said when they first encountered the manna: “What is this stuff?’

In today’s first reading from Numbers, the Israelites contrasted the dry flakes of manna gathered from the desert floor to the sumptuous fare they remembered from their years enslaved in Egypt. They lost confidence in Moses and the God who had brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness. Moses in turn begged God to end his life rather than press so burdensome and ungrateful a people on his shoulders, saying, “I cannot carry all this people by myself; they are too heavy for me”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus faced a similar challenge when, hearing that John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod and trying to withdraw to absorb the shock, he found a vast crowd of sick and hungry people waiting for him as the boat arrived on the far shore of the Lake. But rather then be overwhelmed, he cured and fed them

with a miraculous multiplication of a few loaves and fishes. We do not know if Jesus ever felt what Moses or Jeremiah or Job felt in God's service, only that he pressed forward under the weight of the sins of the world to reveal God's patient care and unlimited mercy.

Every disciple's life is sometimes confronted by overwhelming need and demand with only the barest of resources to counter or sustain commitment. "What is this?" or "I cannot bear this burden alone" are as much the prophet's cry as "Here I am, send me." The Eucharist is the promised feast, but only the hint of honey and coriander seed, a sip, a taste and a glimpse of glory to keep us going forward in the desert. We reel with shock at the deaths of others who mentored us, beloved companions who depart and foreshadow our own deaths by pointing beyond the veil to the hidden face that bids us to not lose faith but take the next step. Break bread and share the cup with strangers again and again on the road to Emmaus, open the scriptures until your heart burns within you, but do not give up. If you die with him, you will rise with him. This is the pledge we hear and take each time we renew our Communion with him and one another. He is our *Viaticum,* forever with us on the way.

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