

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 13 – Year B

RCL Readings^{1 2} – Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

ACNA Readings – Exodus 16:2-4, (5-8) 9-15; Psalm 78:(1-13)14-26; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). However, throughout the year there are also smaller feasts. The Tuesday in the eleventh week after Pentecost is a day to remember the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only should we be hearing the word of God during major feasts. Not only should we be hearing the word of God on Sundays. We should be encouraging the children of God so to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's word, that we embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope we have in Jesus our Lord.

Common Theme. In our passages today, we see that simply hearing God and seeing the mighty works of God is not enough. God calls us to walk in a manner that is worthy of His calling. We need to constantly remind ourselves of who God is and what God has done and we need to remind our children of the same. And, knowing who God is and what God has done, we should be obedient when we hear God's commands.

Hebraic Context. The sacred history of the Jewish people demonstrated that miracles are an important way that God works in the world. Supernatural events appear throughout the Bible—from the act of Creation, to the Exodus from Egypt and the many actions of the prophets. Miracles reveal that the Lord does not remain aloof from His creation but that He is consistently working and guiding humanity. In Jewish tradition, miraculous signs and wonders do not stop with the book of Malachi as later Jewish literature, such as the New Testament and the Talmud are also full of miracles.³

The New Testament did not appear from within a vacuum. Many books were written between the end of the Hebrew Scriptures and the birth of Jesus. But also great teachers taught and miracles still happened. The gospels record many of the miracles performed by Jesus—these were not denied by the ruling establishment as never having occurred, rather they were

¹ Alternate RCL readings: II Samuel 11:25-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12

² Transfiguration readings: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; II Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

³ One example were the various miracles undertaken by Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos in Baba Metzia 59a.1-6 as he defended his view of the halachic status of the oven of Akhnai. During the course of the rabbinic debate Eliezer made: a carob tree walk, water defy gravity, and even invoked the Lord's voice from heaven. Nonetheless, Rabbi Eliezer lost his debate as miracles were not considered conclusive evidence of being correct.

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disputed regarding what authority and power He performed them through.⁴ There were even miracle workers mentioned in the New Testament besides Jesus and His disciples.⁵

Miracles were a part of the history as well as the present reality of Jewish culture and society. Sacred history also teaches us that witnessing a divine intervention is no guarantee for an increase of faithfulness or continued obedience. The Israelites that participated in the Exodus bore eyewitness to the miraculous redemptive power of God to defeat one of the most powerful empires of the known world at that time. They encountered the Lord's divine presence at Mount Sinai and heard the voice of God. Despite doing so they chose to disobey God's instructions and complained at their slightest discomfort. The miraculous had no obvious effect on their level of obedience. The gospels record similar responses to the miracles of Jesus. In the Galilee region, the ministry of Jesus is accompanied by miraculous healings, exorcisms, and even resurrections. And while the multitudes flocked to wherever Jesus was located, the gospels do not mention mass renewed interest in God or the kingdom of heaven.

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15.⁶ Exodus 16:1 begins with a timeline and geographical information that means little to many of us today. The Israelites had departed Egypt on the 15th of Nisan. One month later, they were still wandering in the wilderness.⁷ The wondrous and terrifying experiences of the Exodus, the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea (both of which resulted in the deaths of many Egyptians), had begun to fade and the Israelites began to complain.

The people had been redeemed from slavery but, like all people, had short memories when it suited them. They even declared that they would have preferred death, like the plagues God had brought upon the Egyptians. This was surely self-deceiving but their current predicament took up their attention.⁸

⁴ Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3, stated that Jesus was a doer of wondrous works, or miracles. The passage has been debated regarding its authenticity to Josephus, but most scholars agree that Josephus at least wrote part of the paragraph regarding Jesus.

⁵ In Matthew 12:22-32, Jesus, having cast out a demon, was accused of working with Beelzebul. In return, Jesus asked the Pharisees by what authority their children cast out demons—implying that they did. Mark 9:38-39 is one example of someone who cast out demons who wasn't in Jesus' discipleship group while Acts 19:13 mentions a group of itinerant exorcists (although they weren't always successful, it was a known occupation).

⁶ ACNA may also include Exodus 16:5-8

⁷ From the perspective of wandering for forty years, a month is a very short period. However, had the Israelites traveled directly from Egypt to the promised land, even at a slow pace due to children, animals, the elderly, and all their belongings, they could have easily arrived in a single month.

⁸ It can be easy to wonder why the miracles seen by the Israelites didn't bring them to their knees in worship before God for the rest of their life. Unfortunately, miracles don't save people. We too can be brought to our knees in awe or tears and repentance on Sunday and be selfish, self-righteous, or fearful on Monday.

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A month may not seem like a long time, it certainly wasn't long enough to understand that God would even preserve their clothes and sandals for forty years, but food and water are needed on a daily basis. And God did not deny them food. When they came to Moses and Aaron to complain they did not have enough to eat God declared that He would rain bread from heaven for the people.⁹ For forty years God would provide a portion of bread for the people every day.¹⁰

The heavenly bread appearing every morning came with a test. Moses says; "And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not." The test was to only collect what was required and no more. A measure of self control was required as well as a measure of trust that the manna would return the next day.

⁹ Jesus, in John 6:32, specifically stated that Moses wasn't the one who gave the people food in the wilderness—for the bread was from the Father. This is in the context of the people asking how they too could do the [miraculous] work of God, similar works to that of Moses. Jesus turned their request to the non-miraculous—simply believing in the one God would send (as Deuteronomy 18:15 also dictated they should do).

Jewish tradition understood that the manna was sent under the auspices of Moses and so, in Jewish tradition, is attributed to his leadership and authority (*Ta'anit* 9a.9-13). But they also understood that the miracle of manna in the wilderness was from the Lord—a gift from God. Nonetheless, perhaps they forgot that, while God desires to work with and through His people, power and authority are His as are the miracles He performs.

¹⁰ God promised to rain bread from heaven. This bread, (לחם, *lechem*) would be different than any bread the people of Israel had had before. In Exodus 16:15, after God fulfilled His promise, the people asked מן הוא (*mōn who*, often translated as "What is it?") for they did not know what it was (מה הוא, *mah who*, correctly translated as "What is it?"). Exodus 16:31 states that the name for the bread became מן, *mōn* or in English manna. מן הוא (*mōn who*) doesn't appear to have an internal reason to be translated as "what is it?" outside of the pun in Exodus 16:15

Etymologies in Hebrew are often linked to three letter roots (although bi-letter roots are also known) but are not always obvious, particularly when considering possible foreign language influences (such as Arabic, Aramaic, and Egyptian all of which have words scholars have tried to link with manna). One possible etymology is that the word is derived from מנה *mōnna*, or portion. God gave a portion for all the children of Israel. Each one was to gather enough for the needs of their family, no more—but there was plenty for all. Exodus 16:17-18 states that if they gathered more than they needed they could share with those who could not gather enough (perhaps youth helping the elderly or well established families helping families with young children). The portion for each family would not be the same, for some families would be larger and have more needs but all would receive from God what they needed.

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Psalm 78:23-29.^{11 12} Psalm 78 serves as a poetic narrative of God's divine history among His people. Asaph reminded all those who visited the Temple just what God had done as the Levites declared the glorious deeds, the might, and the wonders of the LORD. If we, or the generation after us, don't know what God does—how He has been faithful, the power He holds, and the reasons He has acted—why would we be faithful to God in turn? On the other hand, hearing of God's faithfulness to earlier generations should give us hope in God. And hearing about the results of man's stubborn sin, God's wrath, should help us keep His commandments.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the most common command that the Lord gave was to remember.¹³ Asaph, in Psalm 78, urged the people not to forget the miracles of the Lord. More than that, we are told to retell, remember, and relearn what the Lord has done and what He has instructed us to do.

Most of the miracles mentioned throughout Psalm 78 are related to the Exodus, which is the most significant redemptive event in the sacred history of the Jewish people.¹⁴ For Asaph and

¹¹ ACNA: Psalm 78:1-26

¹² Psalm 78 is one of 12 psalms attributed to Asaph. Asaph and the sons of Asaph served as worship leaders in the Temple (I Chronicles 6:39, 15:19; II Chronicles 5:12; Ezra 2:41, 3:10; Nehemiah 11:17, 22-23). Asaph was also considered to be a prophet (I Chronicles 25:2). Psalm 78 speaks of the history of the interaction between God, His great wonders, and His people. It is the second longest psalm in the Scriptures.

¹³ The repetitive nature of this commandment, "remember", doesn't imply it is the most important commandment—the most important commandment is to love the LORD our God and love our neighbour. But, as a forgetful people, it is good and right to remember all that God has done and commanded us to do.

¹⁴ One of the miracles in our reading today was God's provision of manna and meat in the wilderness, Psalm 78:23-28. Psalm 78:25 has caused some debate on what the "bread of the angels" means. Do angels eat? Do angels even have a corporeal form?

While angels are seen throughout the Scriptures doing the work of God and worshipping Him, we don't actually know that much about them. Job 38:7 may indicate that Angels were created prior to God laying the foundation of the earth. The sons of God slept with the daughters of man (Genesis 6:2). In many early traditions, the sons of God were thought to be angels, such as mentioned in Job 1:6 and 2:1 (specifically fallen angels in Genesis 6:2: I Enoch, Jubilees, Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 22.4, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian)—later traditions associated the sons of God with the lineage of Seth (Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Genesis Rabbah 26.5). Even among the most learned of scholars, there has been no consensus. Angels did eat food given to them by Abraham (Genesis 18:8). Genesis 6 and 18 seem to indicate angels can take material form. We also have different descriptions of a plethora of angels in Scripture, some appear quite similar to humans while other angels look wildly different.

John of Damascus stated, "An angel, then, is an intelligent essence, in perpetual motion, with free-will, incorporeal, ministering to God." However, he goes on to state, "All that we can understand is, that it is incorporeal and immaterial. For all that is compared with God Who alone is incomparable, we find to be dense and material. For in reality only the Deity is immaterial and incorporeal." This sounds like a

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those visiting the Temple, this was a far distant event but an event they were called to participate in.¹⁵ But at the beginning and end of remembering what God had done in the past, Asaph also made sure to remind the people of what had happened in their own lifetimes and the generation before them.¹⁶

Of course, simply remembering (or even experiencing) the miracles of God is not enough. We also need to turn towards God. Psalm 78 follows the pattern set in Leviticus 26:14-46, there is chastisement when we rebel in order that we turn back to God. Four times Israel rebelled against God: Psalm 78:9-16, 17-31, 32-55, and 56-72.¹⁷ And yet, God still provided for them—still worked miracles in Egypt and the wilderness. Even in their own generation God still provided. If God had never done anything but exist, what could we possibly praise Him for—there would be no knowledge of who God is, no relationship with Him, nor any real reason to desire to know

paradox, angels are incorporeal but also material and corporal. But this paradox would neither bother the Jewish scholars nor the early Orthodox fathers. Beyond that, Psalms are poetic.

The Hebrew and the Greek translation differ slightly as the Hebrew does not state that they ate the bread of angels but rather the bread of the mighty (אֲבִירִים), the Septuagint does use the term angels (αγγελων) which most of our English translations borrow from. In John 6:31, the people use the term from the previous verses, Psalm 78:23-24, the bread of heaven. This does not necessarily mean bread from the heavenly realms but simply bread from the sky. Nonetheless, bread that only God could provide.

Both in Psalm 78 and John 6 the point is that, despite the evidence of God's faithfulness through His actions, His people continue to rebel. Despite that rebellion, however, God provides generously and saves His people.

¹⁵ The Passover was a festival not simply to remember what God did for Israel's forefathers but what God had done for every man, woman, and child in all of Israel's generations. Even in the World to Come Jesus will continue to celebrate the passover with His people.

¹⁶ Asaph worked with Heman, the grandson of Samuel the prophet who was, himself, the protege of Eli of Shiloh. In Psalm 78:60-64, there is reference to the destruction of Shiloh, where the Tabernacle had been in the time of their grandparents. The history of the Bible does not record that Shiloh was sacked, only that the Ark of the Covenant was captured, but here and in Jeremiah 7 and 26 there was knowledge that Shiloh had also been destroyed by the Philistines after the rout of the Israelites. This would have devastated the Levites who would have lost parents and grandparents in the destruction of the Tabernacle, not to mention the loss of the house of God.

Additionally, Psalm 78:67-72 (and possibly Psalm 78:9-10) spoke of the rise of David's reign. David put Asaph, Heman, Ethan and other Levites in charge of worship in (what would soon be) the Temple. David's reign as King was a current political, economic, and religious topic as Israel was finally able to be free of the fear of their neighbours militarily and grow a stable economy.

¹⁷ Leviticus 26 also notes that Israel could rebel four times: Leviticus 26:14-20, 21-22, 23-26, and 27-39. This might not be a strict pattern of "four strikes and you're out". Nonetheless, it does show that God disciplines His people. But just as the people were supposed to remember their God, when the people turned back to God He would remember His own covenant and return to be their God.

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Him. But God has acted, so let's remember what God has done for us, teach our children, and repent for when we have forgotten.

Ephesians 4:1-16. Having detailed the manifold works and grace of God up until this point in his letter, Paul turned to the response of the Ephesians to God's divine grace and loving kindness—the Ephesians should walk in a manner worthy of their calling. This is a very Hebraic way of saying, live in obedience to God.

Obedience is not seeking salvation through works-righteousness. Dallas Willard stated that “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action. Grace, you know, does not just have to do with forgiveness of sins alone.”¹⁸ God continuously calls for His people to act in obedience.

It is not an accident when the children of God walk in humility or are gentle nor does God force every son and daughter to be patient at all times. Jesus commanded His disciples to “love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Too many times people in the church have assumed that, since Jesus is our peace, the church will be a place of peace and love. Too many times, the world, our children, and even people in the midst of the church have seen strife, bickering, gossip, and fighting in the church and turned away from God.

It takes effort to walk in a manner worthy of all that God has done for us. How can we possibly love each other as Jesus loved us? I don't know, but by the grace of God I'll try. It takes effort to maintain the bond of peace that God has bought for us—the church is rich and poor; political right and political left; Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic; Jewish, Greek, and Arab believers.

Thankfully, we have the same Lord who called each one of us—the one who can do far more than we could possibly ask for or think. We have the same faith and baptism and the same God who has authority over all things. We are one body and there is one Spirit who dwells within us. Though we allow these to divide us, as we argue over baptism, the Holy Spirit, Communion (and even mundane and temporary things, such as political leaders), we should be actively striving for peace, eager to maintain unity wherever possible.¹⁹

Paul quotes the Psalms to declare that the Messiah, following His ascension, gave gifts through the Spirit.²⁰ But we did not all get the same gifts. We are not all equal in that way. We have the

¹⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*

¹⁹ There are also Scriptures that tell us to turn away false prophets, teachers and teachings as well as those who are actively sinning in the church. But even then, we seek to return those who will repent and reunite with them as they turn to God.

²⁰ Paul quoted Psalm 68:18 and then added commentary that has interested, astounded, confounded, and brought a beautiful mystery to Biblical scholars ever since. Many early Jewish commentators related

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same Spirit but different gifts and the only way we can have access to all the various gifts that we each have is to be in fellowship with each other.

Hebrew Perspective. In response to Jesus' admonition not to labour for things perishable but to work for things that endure forever, the people of the Galilee asked Jesus what they needed to do to in order to do the works of God—ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ? (The word for works, ἔργα, is in the plural.) In the next verse Jesus said that the work of God, ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ (where the word work ἔργον is in the singular), is to believe on Him (Jesus) whom He (God) has sent.

In the Hebraic perspective, belief, or faith, is something you engage in—not only something you consciously believe to be true.²¹ But just as in Deuteronomy 18, where God told the people to listen to the one who would be sent, there was the assumption that, in listening, they would follow God's commands. How do we faithfully believe? What does that look like?

God has never been aloof from His creation—He is an active participant with it. The Lord often acted through His signs and wonders but His deeds in the world were never restricted only to miracles. The Jewish sages went through the Hebrew Scriptures looking at the things God did.

Psalm 68:18 with Moses going up the Mount Sinai (Psalm 68:17) and returning with the tablets God had given him, such as *Midrash Tanchuma 3.1*, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46.5*, and *Avot d'Rabbi Natan 2.3*. Moses alone went up the mountain of God, which caused envy and gossip. There he received the Law of God that would bring life to man, a great gift “among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.” Before he could give them, he saw the rebelliousness of Israel and broke the tablets as they would bring death rather than life.

Moses started at the bottom of the mountain, ascended and then descended with God's gift to even those who were rebellious and held captive. The phrase, “Κατωτερα μερη της γης” (the lower regions, the earth) in Ephesians 4:9 has had many commentaries written on it. In Greek writings in the time of Paul, it would signify a geological and geographical delineation (such as Strabo, *Geography*, 1.3.22, 4.2.3, 13.1.35, and 17.1.2). However, Paul spoke in a very rabbinical way in Ephesians 4 (not disagreeing with that which came before concerning Moses, but adding to it) in stating that Jesus started above, descended and then ascended once again.

We will not add to the vast wealth of commentary that has come before us but to say that the gifts Jesus brought was to bring the life of God to those who were in ignorance and rebellion against God. This mystery in Ephesians 4 should not bring argument but awe at the mystery of what Jesus has done, bringing the weak—even the captives who once were rebellious—to a place they can receive life as God will dwell in our midst.

²¹ John never uses the word faith πίστις *pistis* in the Gospel (it is only found once in I John 5:4). Rather, John constantly uses the cognate πιστεύω *pisteuō* (belief) which carries with it the meaning of trust in something as well being convinced that something is true. The book of Genesis likewise does not include the word faith but rather describes the Biblical characters trusting and believing God, for example “Abraham believed God”.

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God's actions became known as the *gemilut hasidim*, the acts of loving kindness. For example, God fed the Israelites in the desert. So one of the *gemilut hasidim* is to feed the hungry.

Disciples should imitate their master. The children of God should imitate their Father. In other words, do the things—the works—that God does! The quest then, and the question that is asked of Jesus in John 6:28, is to know how to imitate the Lord and do the works of God. In John 14:12 Jesus says; “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing”. For Jesus this begins with believing in Him. The word ‘believe’ πιστεύσητε in verse 29 is aorist active, meaning that the verb is a present continuous tense in which the subject (the one who believes) is also the doer (that is, believing is something you do). If we profess to believe in Jesus then this is the basis for doing the works of God (if we didn't believe in God or if God were not faithful in His mercy and grace then we would have no foundation or reason to do the work of God). The desire, and the obligation, is to imitate Him and do what He does and teaches.

John 6:24-35. After Jesus fed the 5,000, the Gospel of John did not record any public miracles by Jesus in the Galilee. The miracles of Jesus made Him popular, but His popularity did not seem to be resulting in repentance but rather in the people wishing to make Jesus a king in their own image.²²

The people had partaken of an amazing miracle with messianic implications, and so the people sought Jesus for more signs and more miracles. They started to ask questions but Jesus didn't answer them, rather He chose to rebuke them before offering them words that may have been familiar to them, “Do not work for the food that perishes.”²³ Interestingly, following the rebuke, the people finally seemed to have asked the correct question. “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”^{24 25}

Earlier, the people had perceived something that God had spoken, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” A day later, Jesus answered the crowd's question by stating the

²² We have already stated this, but miracles do not save people. The people witnessed a miracle, they heard Jesus teach. But many of them had not put Jesus' teaching into practice. Perhaps, as we gather to worship the Lord our God and hear His word, we should let that sink in.

²³ Bread from heaven is most readily associated with manna. Manna is infamous for becoming putrid and perishing in less than 24 hours, not good for anything. In Isaiah 55:2, the prophet asks the people why they spend money for that which is not bread and cannot satisfy? God told the Israelites that His bread would always be available. All that would be needed to receive the bread would be to listen to God and seek Him—repent and return to Him.

²⁴ See Hebrew Perspective.

²⁵ Jesus was not telling the people to stop all agricultural work. Rather, he was critiquing them on following material, or even spiritual, culture. Yes, miracles can be important but they can't replace faithfulness or obedience. And as for the material culture, it too can be useful: education, careers, etc. We don't have to give all of it up but it should be kept in perspective. Much of what we do is temporary but even if we work in agriculture or accounting, we can actually work for eternal things as we listen to God and obey Him.

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obvious. “Believe in him whom He has sent.” The people should have known this, for Moses had already written it down for them, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” (Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

Belief and hearing aren't passive activities in Jewish thinking—neither is it simply something done by the head. Sure, demons believe but their belief is useless for them, for they do not act faithfully before God. Belief, or faith, needs to be accompanied by activity.²⁶ As Paul said in Ephesians, “make every effort”. Instead of choosing to make an effort—to repent and seek God, as John the Baptist and Jesus had commanded; to love their neighbour as themselves, as God had commanded; to provide for the hungry, as God, Jesus, and the young boy had done—the people asked for Jesus to perform more signs.

Unfortunately, while they asked the right question they failed to listen to (and act on) the answer Jesus gave. Instead, they proved Jesus to be correct in His rebuke. If Jesus were the prophet like Moses, then Jesus should prove it by sending bread from heaven like Moses did or some other great sign. In the beginning Jesus told the crowd that they sought Him just for the physical food and, in the end, they asked Jesus to give them the bread forever.²⁷

²⁶ Faith, in Hebrew, is a gerund “faithing”. It is the act of being full of faith, or faithful. Thanks be to God that He shows that He is faithful through all that He has done and continues to do.

²⁷ Jesus' rebuke must not be considered to just be for this one crowd. How often have I (both the writer and the reader) heard what God declares from the pulpit, from our shepherds, or from the very Word of God of God and said, “Yes, exactly. But...” or “Preach it, that's so true—of them.” or simply proceeded to not act in accordance with God's desires in the following days, months, and years? How often have we heard the Word of God and wondered what relevance it has for us? The preacher only told us how God reacted to people ignoring His instructions, they didn't give us concrete steps to follow. We can safely ignore that sermon—it was only about the wrath of God towards others. After all, I don't want an angry king over my life, just the loving and merciful one. That God we heard about today must not be real.