Deuteronomy 8:2,3, 14-16

2 Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. 3 He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

John 6:51-58

51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”
When we were little girls, my sisters and my cousins loved to be together in the summer time. One of our favorite activities when we were together was to put on a show. We would ask our parents for some money – a few dollars and then take off to the store to buy candy and treats. We didn’t eat them – we set them aside. Then we spent the rest of the day writing a little play or setting up a bit of a talent show. It never occurred to us that we actually had very little talent, and that none of us had particularly good voices for singing, or that writing a play was way beyond our abilities. I understand that the commercials we inserted during the performance were hilarious though.

We knew our audience. We just knew our parents and grandparents would love the show. As evening came, we would sell them tickets – tickets we had made from old greeting cards my Mom shared with us. Our costumes were sourced from Mom and Dad’s closets and generally the props came from Dad’s workshop. The chairs for the audience came from the dining room and were carried out to the family’s backyard. During intermission, we sold the treats we had bought earlier in the day back to the parents who had financed the whole venture.

When it was all over, we were so proud of ourselves! We had earned enough money to be able to buy lots of treats the next day – and we had done it all by ourselves!

As the little kids, it was funny of course! Our parents had many a good giggle as we crowed about our success. But in reality, we had fallen into the same temptation that has plagued the human race since the Garden of Eden. We believed our success was completely the result of our own efforts. We believed we were independent.

In a much more serious fashion, in our Deuteronomy reading, Moses is speaking to the children of Israel about this very temptation as they gather at the banks of the Jordan, looking across to the land God is giving them.

They have lived for forty years in a state of subsistence. They have been wanderers in a desert, gathering manna each morning for food, depending on God to lead them to a water supply. They have lived daily facing death by hunger or thirst, and with the danger of harsh elements, wild animals and enemy attack. What if the manna failed to appear each morning? What if there was no water? The young and middle-aged folks have never known any other way of living.

Yet, actually, it is not the first time the nation has been in this place. Several months into their escape from Egypt, the people of Israel had been in this same location, looking across the same Jordan into the same land of plenty. Yet it was also a land inhabited by fierce warriors, and their dread made them run in retreat. Now those fearful former slaves had almost all died off, and their children were being given a chance to venture into the rich land their parents avoided.
Now, they face two dangerous and seemingly opposite temptations. The human tendency is to forget or distrust God during the extreme conditions of either want or prosperity.

So as they gather on the banks of the Jordan, one temptation is to walk the way of their parents and let fear paralyse them where they are. The way they have been living has been hard, but it is one they know. It is familiar. It has worked in the past.

Moses reminds them that it has worked – only because God has provided for them and God has protected them. The manna and the water came at God’s command – at God’s word. And if they retreat to all they have known, if they are disobedience to God, will the manna and the water be provided?

Moses reflects that the very experience they were tempted to cling to – as hard as it was – had been God’s design to humble and test – or train them.

MMMM – why did God need to humble them? Because like the little kids we were, putting on a show “all by ourselves”, they needed to recognize that their very existence was a gift from God. That when life was pared down to the barest necessities, it was God’s power and grace that would sustain them. And that desert experience tested – or trained them. They now knew, to the core of their beings, that their lives depended on God and that in those difficult and dangerous circumstances, God had been faithful. They had survived. And the God who had sustained and protected them in the danger and adversity of the desert would sustain them in whatever future they were being called to. Because of this, they could trust.

Yet another temptation loomed, though and it is perhaps the one that is most predominant in our western culture. The people of Israel will enter this land of plenty. After a time, the land will be conquered. They will plant crops and gather herds, build houses and have children. They will become people of commerce. They will become comfortable in their day to day lives, and in time it will become so easy to forget the time in the desert and their ultimate dependence on God. And that will lead them to lose their close connection to the God who loved them, who longs to be in a relationship with them. They will begin to believe that they did this all by their own good efforts.

Moses warns them “then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” “They, like us, will forget that every breath is by God’s grace. And for us, the idols of ease and self-sufficiency, and accommodation to our culture can become as attractive to us as the idols of Baal became to the Israelites.
Just before the Second World War, a German theologian and eventual martyr, Bonhoeffer wrote about this. He warned that we can become so comfortable that we forget all that we are and have are gifts of God – until we face a crisis.

Our health is threatened. Someone we love is taken away, our job disappears, our investments tank, our kids mess up

A microscopic virus emerges and suddenly the life we have known is turned upside down. Nothing is the same and we wonder where God is in all of this. Ordinary things like seeing our friends, going to the store, or hugging our grandkids become events fraught with danger.

And the spiritual life we have known, compassed about with the predictable Sunday gathering, the lovely security of worshiping weekly with those we trust and love, the hymns and the prayers and yes – even the grace of the Eucharist, is suddenly torn away. In many ways, we are relegated to a desert, and while we are thankful for the manna – for these technological gifts that allow us to worship “together while apart” – we long deeply for the richness of the bread and wine, the fellowship and the corporate worship that has ordered our life in Christ. We stand at the banks of our personal Jordons, looking across to the promised land of post-COVID, and we are not sure just what that land will be like and what giants may lurk there to attack us.

What to do, what are we to do? More importantly, what is God doing in all of this? Is it possible that, like the people of Israel, God is using this time to humble and train us? I suspect he is. Bonhoeffer suggested that as we become comfortable people, we tend only search God out in “the gaps” of our lives – the times of deep joy, great sorrow or need. But God, he says, refuses to be relegated to the gaps in our lives. God wills to inhabit each breath, for God’s presence is as essential to the eternal life Jesus promised as bread is to our bodies and air is to our lungs.
Just before our gospel reading today, Jesus has fed the 5000 – and the people follow him. Who could blame them. They live life on the edge of hunger and here is one who might have the power to feed them bread as Moses, they believe, fed manna to their ancestors in the desert.

They will settle, it seems, for food to fill their bellies. It is not enough, Jesus is telling them, for them to look to him to meet their physical – their urgent needs. Their deep and profound hunger – the hunger he longs to fill is not a hunger for what he can give them – but a hunger for Jesus himself. The manna in the desert lasted for a day and then spoiled. The bread Jesus fed the people on the hillside satisfied their gnawing hunger for a day.

Jesus was offering them – and us – so much more. He is offering Himself – the living bread, the living water. He calls us to live in a relationship with him that is so deep and pervasive that it imbues every aspect of our lives. He invites us to a realization that our dependency on him is so critical, that without the gift of his life in us, we cannot live the eternal life that is even now pulsing in the veins of those who have given themselves to him in trust.

We are called to be so connected to Christ that it is his flesh that we are joined to – that we “eat” and his blood that beats from the new heart he has given us to energize and sustain each breath that the Holy Spirit breathes through us in the everydayness of our lives. He will not be just the God of our gaps. He determines to be the very core of our existence.

And during this time of deprivation – we find so many of the things that we have leaned on to support that life, ripped away. We cannot meet together to pray, to sing, to hear and discuss the Word corporately and hardest of all for many of us, we are denied the Eucharist. And rightfully, we long for these things as deeply as any starving person has ever longed for food.
Perhaps, though, God’s purpose in all of this is to drive us to an utter dependence on the Bread of Life, the Living Word. In this desert time, God is allowing us to be hungry – deeply so, in order to bring us to a profound understanding of how critical our relationship with God, through Jesus, by the Holy Spirit is to our souls.

And we remember that the Isaelites spent much time in the desert, yes – but they were not left there forever. God led them across the Jordon. They had struggles along the way for sure, but he led them into the land of milk and honey and in that land he dwelt with them. And the day will come when we will gather again. We will be fed, body and soul, by the gifts of fellowship, and learning and prayer, the Word read and the Word examined and oh – yes – the Living Word placed in our outstretched hands and on our thirsty lips. Until it does, let us not waste this time God is giving us to be apart, to grow in dependence and intimacy with him, to earn to feed on the Bread of Life in the solitude of our homes. And when we are able to gather again, let us not forget the lessons learned in this desert time. May we never take for granted the graces of fellowship and Eucharist and the corporate body of Christ signing and praying and receiving together.

Above all, may we, who “eat this bread and drink this cup” live and move and have our being deeply and profoundly aware that all we are and all we have are God’s grace to us.

AMen