

Sermon by the Rector Proper 14-B
August 9, 2009

[2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33](#)

[Psalm 130](#)

[Ephesians 4:25-5:2](#)

[John 6:35, 41-51](#)

We all want "bread from heaven": a word from on high, enlightenment from a place beyond the reach of our own understanding. But when someone purports to offer it, we respond as Jesus' auditors did: "Who do you think you are?"

The elections of our last two presidents demonstrate this phenomenon vividly. In 2000, many voters had grown weary of "triangulation", the Clintonian strategy of plotting a middle course between conservative and liberal, keeping each side comparatively happy. Many agreed with the conservative critique, that triangulation was nothing more than a "vacation from history", a way to avoid confronting difficult issues and even threats. For some, George W. Bush's message came as "bread from heaven": face threats head-on, confront issues, take decisive action, spend political capital, in a way that cuts through the ambiguities and evasions of triangulation.

Not much time passed, though, before voters, even some of Bush's supporters, started to ask, "Who does this guy think he is?" Purported decisiveness came off as arrogance and a lack of curiosity.

In 2008, we were tired of polarization, of intractable divisions between red states and blue, antagonists in the "culture wars", Republican and Democrat. Barack Obama's message: "there are no red states, no blue states, there's only the United States" – impressed many voters as a word from on high. Obama offered a transcendent, reconciling vision – common ground in a time of polarities: bread from heaven.

Already, though, even some of those who voted for him wonder exactly who he thinks he is. The "one nation" vision seems a little fuzzy, maybe even a smokescreen for running up huge deficits and expanding federal power.

Bush and Obama represent two kinds of "bread from heaven", two "words from on high": decisive action, cutting through ambiguities and compromises to engage issues, revealing clarity where it was lacking; and a transcendent, uniting vision, revealing common ground where we thought there was none. We yearn for it, in one or both forms, though we regard its purported bearers with considerable skepticism.

Our need of, and yearning for, heavenly bread come across with great power and poignancy in the story of David and Absalom.

To refresh your memories: David has committed the gravest of sins. Not only has he slept with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, while her husband fought in the front line of the king's army; he's also sent orders (with appalling cold-bloodedness, through Uriah himself) for the army to draw back from Uriah when the fighting grew intense, that he might be killed in the battle. And so it happened.

Nathan, David's court prophet, has told David that he will suffer the consequences of his sin. Violence and bloodshed shall arise from within his own household. And indeed it has. Absalom, David's favorite son, the tallest, handsomest and most charismatic of his sons, has risen in rebellion against his father. As today's story unfolds, the battle between the king's army and Absalom's rages.

And David finds himself caught between two irreconcilable imperatives, two mutually exclusive desires – between a rock and a hard place. He can re-gain his throne, or his beloved son Absalom can live. One or the other. From out of his depths, in the words of today's psalm, David is crying out for bread from heaven, a word from on high, a decisive action or a transcendent vision that can free him from this awful choice, reconcile or transcend these conflicting imperatives.

But no such bread, no such word, is forthcoming. David tells his generals, Joab, Abishai and Ittai, to deal gently with the young man, but he knows that Joab, especially, will do no such thing. When Joab finds Absalom, suspended from a tree by his flowing locks, he has him killed. No one, least of all David, could have expected him to do otherwise. "Absalom, Absalom, my son, Absalom", he cries out, in an expression of anguish and grief that gave a Faulkner novel its title; but he knew anguish and grief was his destiny from the moment Nathan uttered his oracle, and probably before.

The lesson is pretty darn clear: in this world, don't expect much in the way of bread from heaven. Words from on high are scarce. It's best to make our peace with ambiguities and compromises, with triangulation and polarization, with intractable conflicts and irreconcilable imperatives, with "rock-and-a-hard-place" dilemmas.

And indeed it is. But this sort of peace exacts a price. Night after night, week after week, year after year, the sun goes down on our anger – what Ephesians counsels us not to let happen. It's not sudden, hot anger. It's the anger that comes from accepting what we, in and from our depths, do not wish to accept. It comes from being stuck between various rocks and hard places. It builds over time. It can burst forth in verbal or even physical aggression. It's often in evidence during rush hour. It manifests itself in passive aggression. Sometimes it turns inward and engenders depression. Worst of all, it keeps us from perceiving the blessings God sends from time to time.

Blessings? They are these: words from on high that come rarely, but surely come. Bread from heaven that doesn't fall frequently, but unfailingly falls.

Think of the friend – we all have one like this – who won't let us just unburden ourselves. He or she always proposes a strategy, a three-point plan, a goal-directed undertaking, that can get us out from between the rock and the hard place. We wish they'd just listen, nod, sympathize, and let us be. Every once in a while, though, we should listen to them. Sometimes – not always, or even frequently – the three-point plan could actually help us. Decisive, goal-oriented action might show us a way beyond the unsatisfying, frustrating peace we've made with some seemingly intractable reality. Bread from heaven.

Or think of Grace's dear friend, Kenneth Lee. We held a memorial service for him yesterday. Kenneth, after his service in the Navy, had problems with the Veterans Administration. I'm not sure what they were, but they developed into an irreconcilable conflict. Kenneth was stuck. Give an inch on the issue of the VA, and he felt he'd give away his integrity. He saw no common ground between them, no place for reconciliation, and the size and power of the VA made any kind of decisive action unthinkable. Night after night, for many years, the sun went down on Kenneth's anger. Anyone who knew him could feel it, seething just below, and occasionally above, the surface.

Something happened, though, during the 10 weeks or so Kenneth spent at the VA Hospital on Irving Road here in DC. Several staff members – a couple of nurses, a physician's assistant, a chaplain – made Kenneth a project. They set out to win some measure of trust from him. As far as I can tell, they succeeded. They took decisive, goal-oriented action, engaging Kenneth daily, talking and listening, whenever he permitted or tolerated it. Common ground emerged. He gave an inch. The rock and the hard place, Kenneth's implacable anger and what he saw as the VA's high-handed disdain for the veterans it's supposed to serve, both softened. He continued to say bad things about the agency, until he couldn't talk anymore. But he acknowledged a few exceptions to what he liked to call his "broad brush" judgment. Thanks to some dedicated VA staffers, a little bread from heaven fell onto Kenneth's plate in his last days.

Communion itself, consuming the bread of life, is a prayer the church says every week. Help us, we say, in the midst of our necessary skepticism about "words from on high", not to believe they are never spoken. Help us, even as we necessarily distrust offers of bread from heaven, not to refuse them all.