

BEING FED IN-BETWEEN

--I've been at this God-stuff for a while now, and over these years I have learned a few things.

For example, I've learned that God loves our beginning-moments, with their unique sense of promise, excitement, and limitless possibility.

God relishes the opening of new chapters of our lives--births, baptisms, first days away at school, new jobs, new relationships, marriages, the move into a new home, the start to an exciting trip to somewhere we've never been before.

Yes, God really enjoys these beginning-moments.

And that's not all. God loves, too, our ending-moments, with their unique sense of completion, accomplishment, and fulfillment.

God also relishes those concluding-of-chapters in our lives--confirmations, graduations, retirements, the last payment on a debt, the final achievement for which we have labored long and hard, even a death at the end of a lengthy, productive, and satisfying life.

Oh, yes, God really enjoys these ending-moments, too.

--But perhaps most important of all, God particularly loves the "in-between" moments--those moments between our endings and our next beginnings. They're especially endearing to God.

In the time between our beginnings and endings, we generally know where we're going and what we have to do to get there. We are clear about our future agenda, we have our goals in sight, and we have a pretty good idea what we will need to do in order to get there. In other words, there's a lot of us in the route that lies between our beginnings and endings.

By contrast (assuming that I do not lose you in the language here), in the time between our endings and new beginnings, we aren't really sure where we're headed, what will come next, what it will look like when we get there, or what might be required of us along the way.

That is the nature of these "in-between" (dare I say?--"interim") moments, which are frequently the sweetest to God. They are the sweetest, because, while they may feel frighteningly disorienting and frustratingly disadvantaging to us, they are supremely opportune to God. If there's a lot of us in the self-directed ground between our beginnings and endings, there's a lot of God in that territory between our endings and the following beginnings.

If we aren't really sure where we're headed, then God has the chance of whispering direction into our puzzled hearts. If we aren't really sure what comes next, then God stands the chance of introducing us to things that otherwise we would probably ignore, since they don't fit with our pre-planned schemes. If we aren't really sure what it will look like when we get to that next beginning-point, then God has a much freer hand to be shaping that future. And if we aren't really sure what will be asked of us en route, then we have little sense in advance where exactly to push-back or resist, as we characteristically do if we can see ahead to the coming twists and turns.

You see how it works. Our “in-between” times--our times between our endings and our new beginnings--are times of great opportunity for God.

--Not surprisingly, some of the most instructive parts of the old Exodus tradition are those that deal with Israel’s “in-between” moments, moments between what-was-and-no-longer-is and what-is-not-yet-and-has-still-to-come. It is in that stretch of wilderness, essentially the exasperating terrain of not seeing clearly or not-knowing fully, that Israel moves--wondering where their next drink will come from, wondering where their next meal will come from, wondering when the long wait will ever be over, and wondering, when it is over, how different things will look.

In the midst of all this human nervousness and stressfulness, God patiently guides the people through that land extending from their ending-moment in Egypt to their next beginning-moment in the Promised Land. They have only to attend carefully to that guidance, which by day and by night never abandons them. They have only to remain conscious of and compliant with that guidance, and they will arrive there, not just safe but sounder and saner than what they were before. It is there where Israel--hardly at its best, caught in these “in-between” moments--feels so out of control, and where, by virtue of that fact, God has the opening to do some remarkable things with them.

In this morning’s reading, that takes the form of the miraculous feeding by way of this dew-like thing that covers the ground around the camp, “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost . . . and the taste of it [is] like water made with honey” (16.14,31). *Manna* they call it--which actually represents a little-known play on words. Seeing it for the first time, they say to one another, “What is it?” In Hebrew, the words are *man hu*. In short, one of them asks, “What is it?” And another one says, “That’s a great idea! Let’s call it, ‘What is it?’” And *manna*--“what is it?”--it becomes! Great story, huh?

--It requires little imagination to see the connection between the remarkable feeding of Israel in the wilderness and our own feeding here this morning. In both instances, the people of God find themselves being fed “in-between.”

We aren’t where we were a year ago, but we have yet to arrive at where we’re headed, wherever that may be. We’re someplace in the middle of that passage which eventually will deliver us to where we’re going. In terms of where we find ourselves at this “in-between” moment, we have about as much certainty and clarity as Israel does back there in that wilderness.

What we can be sure of, though, is that God is thrilled about this auspicious time with us--when we are a bit confused and a bit off-balance, perhaps feeling that we are getting nowhere fast, even worrying that we may be lost. It is just the sort of time where God has the freest hand to reshape and redirect us.

Oh, we may still wonder when the long wait will ever be over; and we may still wonder, when it is over, how different things will look--but we can plainly see where our next holy meal is coming from.

It’s coming from over there, on the altar--which, when we think of it, is also pretty remarkable.