

**3rd Sunday of Lent
March 7, 2010
10 am Liturgy**

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Recently a friend passed along to me a delightful little book called *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*. It is written by New York Times journalist Michael Pollan, who has written several other best sellers about nutrition and the typical Western diet. This book is full of pithy tidbits of advice, such as: “Don’t eat anything your great-great grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food.” Or “If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don’t.” There are other rules as well: “It’s not food if it arrived through the window of your car.” And finally: “Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce.”

A main thesis of the book is that the typical Western diet (exported around the globe by mostly American companies) prefers to be freeze-dried, single-portion size, wrapped ever so slightly in clear plastic containers, and dated for maximum storage. We seem to have lost a sense that all good food does, indeed, go bad eventually.

I’m not sure it’s only food we tend to want this way. Some people prefer their culture freezer-wrapped as well. Small and predicable cellophane bits of information sell well these days. Some have come to prefer Twitter to

conversation, Google to old fashioned searches, and Apps to encyclopedias.

Neatly packaged religious beliefs have also become popular again.

Catechisms are selling big-time. As are religious self-help books and tapes that deliver smaller and more manageable gods for us. “Read this book and you’ll understand god much more clearly than ever before!”

Remember, it’s not food if it arrived through the window of your car! It’s not real food for your stomach; it’s not real food for your soul either.

Toward the middle of Lent each year, just when some of us have finally got into our Lenten stride of “practices” and think we know what we’re doing during Lent this year, along comes today’s readings. There’s nothing freezer wrapped. In fact, there’s not much even intelligible at all. It is a very confusing set of readings that only appears to make the mystery of God seem simple.

The Exodus reading is one of the most familiar and important in the entire Old Testament. Moses is wandering around Mount Horeb with the in-laws’ flock when he is distracted by a burning bush and takes the time to digress, to investigate. (The first lesson we might learn: you have to be curious about strange happenings to find God sometimes. And you have to stop what you’re doing and look!)

God then speaks. God reminds Moses that God is holy. And so is God's ground. Take off your sandals! And when Moses asks who shall I say sent me, God offers one of the most enigmatic lines in human history. God says: tell them I AM sent you.

I bet there are some here who think they might know what that means. We've all read theses that suggest it probably should be translated "I will be who I will be." Or "I who bring all that exists into existence." Or myriad other possibilities. The simple reality is that none of the biblical scholars nor philologists have a clue. It remains a deeply mysterious response. Dianne Bergant says of this passage: "This is a God who reveals and conceals at the same time." Another critic has suggested it be translated: Tell them mystery has spoken. I wonder if that might be closer to the reality? Don't freezer-wrap it; let it be as strange as it sounds. That might be more real.

But, we say, the Old Testament is often confusing. Jesus usually clears up things in his story. But not today, friends. Today Jesus is at least as confusing as Exodus. He seems almost angry at the disciples who want him to explain a great political sacrilege (Pilate mixing the blood of the rebels with sacrificial blood). Instead of explaining it as having any religious significance at all (no sin here), he condemns them, the questioners. And when they then

raise a construction accident (the fallen tower at Siloam) and want an religious explanation for natural disasters (who sinned here?), they get a double condemnation.

Then Jesus returns to one of his favorite illustrations, the poor fig tree. (Remember in Matthew's gospel he actually condemns a dormant fig tree.)

I don't know about you, but this is all very confusing to me. What is the point? Where is the moral? What am I supposed to do with all this information? It's like too much data! The best I can come up with (and many other scholars share this with me) is that, contrary to my initial approach to Jesus' parable where I thought the owner of the fig tree was the God-figure who condemns the poor tree, actually the gardener may be Jesus himself. And the gardener says to the owner: give it more time, and lots more manure, good fertilizer. Then let's see what happens. Just let it be and wait!

The time to wait and watch for growth is now, and the fertilizer is ours too, friends. This is it. Perhaps right here and right now. God knows, there is enough manure in today's world; there are enough puzzles in today's church; and there is enough time this Lent to look around, to turn around, to repent. But the mystery is and always will remain mystery.

There is no cheap, small god worth worshiping. Those gods are all only

idols. And the only moral I can find was summarized nicely by Barbara Taylor Brown: “We cannot make life safe nor God tame.”

So, don’t take anything for God that your great-great grandmother would not recognize as God. And remember, faith in the *mystery* of God and in the great mystery of our life here on earth, is also not something that is delivered through your car window. We stand at this altar today before, and with, the God of all that has been (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob); we stand before the God of all that is (here and now today); and we stand before the God of all that shall yet become (our fondest and best dreams). So let’s take off our sandals and look around. This is holy ground! And the real Lent continues!