

Proper 20
Cycle A RCL

Exodus 16:2-15

The Priestly Writer, who wrote after the Exile (after 539 BC), has taken the story of the quails written hundreds of years earlier (found in its earlier form in Numbers 11:31-35) and inserted it here. In Numbers 11, God provided the quail because the manna had become insufficient for the wandering Israelites. In this version God provided the quail as a supplement to the diet of manna. The term “fleshpot” (Hebrew: *sir ha-basar*) refers to a cooking vessel, not sex. The etymology *man hu* (“What is it?”) for “manna” (Hebrew: *man*) is based on Aramaic, not Hebrew. Since quail are normally associated only with the north Sinai, some researchers have argued that the story cannot be set in southern Sinai around the traditional site of Mt. Sinai (*Jebel Musa*). Both the Exodus account and the Numbers account see Israel’s behavior in this account as rebellion against the faithful God who has led Israel out of Egypt.

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

This is a *hymn* sung during a national festival in the Jerusalem temple. Hymns most often deal with the Lord’s creation of and control of the natural world; but on occasions of national celebration, the hymns make reference to the saving events and personages of Israel’s history. The major historical event in this psalm is the Exodus from Egypt in verses 12-45a, prefaced by a call to worship in verses 1-11. A mighty thanksgiving *hallelujah* concludes the recitation in verse 45b.

OR

Jonah 3:10-4:11

The *novella* Jonah deals with the question of the extent of God’s power and mercy. Jonah complains that God is *too* merciful and resists the call to preach to the wicked people of Nineveh for fear that they might actually repent and be forgiven. When Jonah finally comes to Nineveh his only words were “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown (3:4)!” But his worst fears were realized when the city repented (3:5). Sitting on a hill outside the city, Jonah waited in the vain hope that God might still decide to destroy Nineveh, and this hilltop waiting is the occasion for the final encounter between God and the reluctant prophet.

Psalms 145:1-8

This *hymn* is an alphabetic *acrostic*, *i. e.* each of its 21 verses commences with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The poetic constraints the acrostic format placed upon the poet were compensated for by ease of learning and transmission.

Philippians 1:21-30

Philippi was named for Philip II of Macedonia who established the city in 356 BCE as a commercial center to serve his mining interests at nearby Mount Pangaeus. The population—as befits a thriving mining town—was of mixed background and many cults flourished there. According to the author of Luke-Acts, Paul visited Philippi and was arrested for exorcising a demon from Lydia the sorceress (Acts 16:12-40). Many interpreters believe that Philippians contains fragments from as many as three different letters of Paul. The occasion for our passage is an imprisonment of Paul’s in which he expresses his concerns for his life of the Christians at Philippi. Mention of the “imperial guard” in 1:13 and of the “emperor’s household” in 4:22 have

led some to the belief that Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote these words and suggest a date for the epistle in the early 60s. This belief, however, has been strongly challenged by contemporary researchers and is by no means sure.

Matthew 20:1-16

This parable is unique to Matthew. Parables in the Gospels are always about the kingdom of God, and more often than not they accomplish their description by challenging the hearers' ordinary beliefs and values to show the kingdom's radical discontinuity with the present evil age. This parable describes what would amount to an unfair labor practice, and it powerfully illustrates the "unfairness" of the fact that the call of the kingdom comes both to those who appear to deserve it and those who do not.

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