

California is a beautiful place to visit and a terrible place to run for political office. Californians have authorized a recall of the governor they just elected, and the media want Arnold Schwarzenegger to take his place. In the land of Hollywood, it is sometimes hard to tell when real life ends and fantasy begins. The people who entered an agreement by electing Governor Davis are now grumbling against him and looking for a way out.

In today's first reading from Exodus, the people who entered a covenant with God are now grumbling and looking for a way out. God had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and offered them the Promised Land. But they had to cross the desert. It was hot. They got thirsty and hungry. The trip was taking forever. This is probably where they coined the expression, "Are we there yet?" They tell Moses they wish they had stayed home. Even if they died back there as slaves, at least they had food.

God said OK. They want food, they can have food. Quail appeared at night, and bread came from heaven at dawn. At least they called it bread. Botanists say there are plants in that desert that drop secretions made from two kinds of lice. I hope they got something more appetizing than that. Tradition holds that something like bread fell from heaven. The Hebrew expression for "What's this?" sounds like "manna", so that's what they called it. There was a catch to God's gift: they had to gather up one portion every day. God said, "Thus will I test them." God gave manna not just because the Israelites were hungry or because God was a nice guy. It was to test how well they would follow instructions. Of course, they didn't follow very well, and God learned as Governor Davis did that making an agreement with people doesn't mean they will always be agreeable.

To us, the Israelites look ungrateful. They got their freedom. They got their own land. They got food in the desert, but they still complained. The road was hard, so they were ready to chuck it all, give up and go back to slavery. But we face the same temptations. We complain about our work, our school, the members of the family or the neighbors; we complain about the traffic or the vegetables mom makes us eat. We wish things were different. We overlook how much God does for us - freeing us from slavery to sin, offering us eternal joy, and giving us the faith we need for the long journey home. God blesses us to test us, to see how well we follow instructions. We have an agreement with God, and for that we offer thanks.