

## SO, WHAT'S THE MANNA?

Sermon, October 1, 2017

World Communion Sunday

Text: Exodus 16:1-15, 31

In our reading from Exodus, the Hebrew people are just starting out on their forty-year wandering in the wilderness. Today's story takes place about six weeks after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea; six weeks after this, they will arrive at Mt. Sinai, where they will be given the Ten Commandments. This is an appropriate reading for World Communion Sunday, as this historical experience of the Israelites has long been seen as a metaphor for all of the people of God. We are all collectively on our way to the Promised Land of God, having crossed the waters of the Red Sea in our baptism and wandering through the wilderness of this world on our way to our promised eternal home. We are all somewhere between leaving slavery behind and fully entering the promises of God. Some in our churches have only recently started that journey to freedom, and remember all too well that slavery they left behind in their former way of life. Some in our churches on this journey were born into the journey; they've been with the wilderness journey their entire lives. Others in our churches may have started out a long time ago, but wandered off into the wilderness and have only recently found their way back to walking along with the gathered people of God. I don't want to dwell on too many details of this metaphor, other than to point out the one thing we ALL have in common ... none of us have "arrived", yet. None of us.

The life of faith really is a journey. Along the journey to our eternal Promised Land, like the Hebrews we, too, may find times when we question and struggle to understand what God is doing. At times some of us on this journey go through some pretty rough terrain, and as such times it's easy to think we just won't have enough resources to make it anymore. Some of us on this journey may wonder at times if we all just got lost along the way somewhere ... are we really heading in the right direction? Does the church really know where she's going, where she's headed? (*It's about this time that some of these people leave the church and wander off elsewhere.*) At times some of us on this journey might begin to wonder just who do we think we are, who do we think we're kidding, thinking we could escape our past enslavements, thinking we could really change and leave our former ways of life to be someone we are really not up to being. And like the Hebrews, along the way we can run into some seemingly insurmountable obstacles, we battle some terrific giants, and we get unexpectedly bitten by some pretty nasty snakes. We can and often do grow tired along the way, very weary of it all.<sup>1</sup> We grow impatient with the difficulties, the uncertainties, the sheer length of this wilderness journey we call life. Yes, we can empathize with these wilderness wanderers more than we care to admit. If we're honest, we would find it very difficult to smugly criticize the Hebrews for their seemingly faithless grumbling throughout the exodus years.

Six weeks earlier, the Israelites were pursued by Pharaoh's chariots, and were trapped at the banks of the Red Sea. They complained to Moses, "*Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us?*" Note that no one seemed to be talking about the glorious hope of the Promised Land, or freedom, or about the wonderful and miraculous power of God they all had witnessed in the plagues which led to their release from centuries of bondage. In their very real fear, all they are talking about is that familiar, secure slavery they had left behind. They are frightened, which is understandable. It's an unfortunate human tendency whenever people are scared that we will, more often than not, trade freedom for security, even if that security is, in reality, a slavery. Moses answered then, as he answered them today in so many words, "**Do not be afraid**" (*that is by far the most frequent command in the bible, by the way!*). "*Don't be afraid, stand firm, and you will see the deliverance of the Lord.*" Moses told them to lift their eyes away from their fears, and told them to lift their eyes toward hope ... hope in the Lord's deliverance. And then one of the grandest miracles of all time took place: the Red Sea parted, they walked through on dry land, and the waters crashed back down upon the pursuing enemy.

It is now six weeks later. They had just about run out of food and again, they are understandably frightened. And again, the frightened people complained, going on about how "wonderful" it was in Egypt. "*Moses, there in Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate all we wanted, but you have brought us into this wilderness and now we're all going to starve to death.*"

That phrase, "*And the people complained to Moses,*" is seen a lot during the exodus. As alluded earlier, one main reason they complain, one main reason many people complain, is fear. Fear is often at the root of complaint. But no leader, no human being, can totally alleviate all the causes of fear. Only God can cast away fear. One of the best pieces of advice I've received over the years (*and please don't read anything into this other than the plain meaning*) is don't

<sup>1</sup> I quoted a *Blue Bloods* line at this point: <https://www.tvfanatic.com/quotes/abigail-im-tired-the-kind-of-tired-you-cant-sleep-off/>

be so quick to rush in and try to service every complaint that comes to your attention (*that works for me as a parent, a pastor, and would if I were a butcher, baker or candlestick maker*). Yes, address concerns where possible, fix things that can be fixed, but at the root of many complaints is a black hole that no one can ever fill. Part of that is due to our human nature that refuses to be totally satisfied with anything ... nothing is ever good enough, and frankly, this side of heaven, nothing will ever be complete, whole, perfect ... there will be something "wrong" with everything. Don't let perfection be the enemy of the pretty good! Don't let the desire for perfection, which can never be sated, ruin your appreciation for what is really good in your life. And the other part of that is life can be scary. Even in the most apparently secure lives, life is scary. Trust me on this, there isn't a person in this room who isn't suppressing some fear about something. There are far more reasons to fear in this imperfect world than any one of us can ever fully address or calm down, which can make us prone to complaint. **Moses, I think, knew that.** Moses knew he was just Moses, not God. He knew the best way, and really, the only way, to meet people's fears is to direct people to God. Time and again Moses said to the people, *"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and lift your eyes to the deliverance the Lord will provide."* Salvation is not to be found in returning to some illusory safety of yesterday, which was really enslavement. Salvation is found in looking to the faithfulness of God in the day you have.

In today's reading, God delivered again. Hordes of migrating quail blanketed the area that evening providing plenty of meat to eat, and the next morning a fine, flaky, edible substance covered the ground. God said to Moses, *"I will rain down this bread from heaven for you each and every day, except for the Sabbath day."* And for the rest of the journey, every day for forty years (*except for the Sabbath days*), the people would go out to find and collect this manna, this bread which had fallen from heaven. Forty years it was the daily staple of the Hebrew diet. We read elsewhere they would try all sorts of variations with it ... grind it in a hand mill, crush it in a mortar, cook it in a pot, make it into cakes. They would make manna soufflé, manna burger, manna-cotti. We're told it tasted like wafers made with honey; when cooked, it tasted like something made with olive oil.

As we read later in this chapter, six days you had to work and gather your own manna, the seventh day you rested from that labor. Besides feeding the people, God was also rehearsing the people in a weekly routine that included six days of work and one day of rest. One day in seven was to be seen as special, set-apart, even holy; you weren't to go out to the Manna Market that day ... after four centuries of forced labor and not being able to observe a Sabbath, this was a merciful routine God was seeking to re-establish among His people. God knows human natures, and He knows human limits ... and He knows human beings need one very different day in seven; we need a day of rest. As an old Greek proverb puts it, *"The bow that is always stretched taut will soon cease to shoot straight."* The fourth commandment they would receive six weeks from now was a very humanitarian legislation; God requires His people to observe a regular weekly break ... a **complete** break ... from their work. It is one of the great merciful laws of the Old Testament, one from which even beasts and servants were to benefit.

And I close with this: Note everyone had to gather their own manna. No one could hoard the manna because it wouldn't last; one could only gather a day's worth, and twice as much on the day before the Sabbath. It was just enough ... just enough to keep you going another day on the journey. And sometimes ... in fact, most of the time ... that is just what we need. God gives us just enough to carry us one day at a time, and calls us to trust Him for our tomorrows. Our daily habits and obedience of faith in the present will often prepare us for the fearful unknowns of the future. As we are told in the footnote to that final verse we read, a literal translation of *manna* is, *"What is it?"* That's what the word "manna" means in the Hebrew. *"What is it?"* The first time they saw it on the ground, they all asked, *"What is it?"* And the name, which was really a question, stuck. Every morning the Hebrews would gather the *"What is it?"* and later the women would prepare it, place it on the dinner table, and their husbands and children would look at what was on the table and ask, *"What is it?"* And the women would say, *"Right!"*

Their daily nourishment each and every morning was literally found in a question. *"What is it?"* And each and every day our spiritual nourishment needs to be rooted in the same question. Every day we need to stop for a time on our journey, and gather "manna." We need to stop and take time each day to come to God in prayer and daily devotion and ask, *"So, what's the Manna?"* We ask, *"What is it, Lord? What is it you want me to do? What is it You are doing? What is it You are asking me to leave behind? What is it that You are calling me to become? What is it, Lord?"* That should be the daily staple, the daily question, of all of us on the journey. As time and again we run into obstacles and fears and disappointments and detours in this wilderness journey we call life, as time and again life asks for more than we seem to have to give to it, we gather our spiritual nourishment by coming to God, placing our lives and the lives of those we love in His hands and asking, *"What is it, God?"*

And trust that He will indeed deliver.