

Exodus 16:1–18

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.”

So, Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning, you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but” against the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning, you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

John 6:48-51

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Our story picks up this morning with Moses again, but we've skipped a few chapters. We've skipped over some of the most exciting incidents in Moses' life: his confrontation with Pharaoh, the Ten Plagues, and the actual Exodus from Egypt. When our story picks up, the Hebrew people have been in the wilderness for a month and a half, and they are complaining. They apparently believed that God freeing them from slavery in Egypt should be a quick fix.

“We'll just leave Egypt, with the whole Egyptian army in hot pursuit, and go right over there, a week's travel or so, and settle down, and everything will be fine. No need to travel a long way. No need for anything else to change. Right?”

Not so much.

God's plan called for the Hebrew people to travel further away from Egypt, far enough that Pharaoh couldn't easily send his army to bring them back at spearpoint.

God's plan called for the Hebrew people to travel far enough to reach the land that God had promised to Abraham.

God's plan called for the Hebrew people to travel far enough that their thinking changed, from the thinking of slaves to the thinking of God's people.

The world is changing around the Hebrew people, but they do not want to change their thinking. They apparently take for granted that God has just freed them from brutal working conditions, harsh exploitation, and the systematic murder of their children. Their attitude seems to be summed up in the question, “What have you done for me, lately?”

Instead of rejoicing in the amazing things that God has just given them, they lament that they no longer have the meat and bread that the Egyptians provided their slaves.

So, God literally gives them bread from Heaven in the morning. It forms with the dew on the ground. The people see it, and they ask, “What is it?” or “Man-huh?” That really is where

the name, “manna” came from.¹ It is white, and it tastes good, though the specific taste apparently varies.²

In addition, a flock of quail flies over and covers the camp. The people catch and cook the quail. So, they have meat and bread. Friends of mine who are hunters assure me that the quail are a bigger miracle than the manna.

The people have meat and bread, staple foods, for forty years in the wilderness. They eat it for so long that they get tired of it. God provides them the food that they need to continue in the wilderness, and they complain about it. They remember all the things they used to eat in Egypt, when they were slaves. They remember fish, and cucumbers, and melons, and leeks and onions and garlic.³ All these things that, logically, they can’t have, wandering in a desert. All these creature comforts that they had, when they were slaves.

Some of the people want to go back to Egypt.

They have no reason to believe that they could get there through the desert, but some of the people want to go back to Egypt.

They have no reason to believe that the Pharaoh would allow them to come back into Egypt, after sending his army to kill them all, but some of the people want to go back to Egypt.

They have no reason to believe that the people of Egypt would welcome them, after the plagues, and particularly the plague of the death of the firstborn sons, but some of the people want to go back to Egypt.

¹ I’m not being obtuse: the word, “manna,” literally comes from the Hebrew word for “What is it?”

² The taste is variously described as “like wafers made with honey” (Exodus 16:31), and “like cakes made with oil” (Numbers 11:8). There is apparently a non-canonical legend that the taste varied according to the eater’s preference (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, footnote on Exodus 16:31).

³ Numbers 11:4-6.

Some of the people ignore all that nasty reality stuff, and want to go back to Egypt.

Do we do that, I wonder?

Do we ever get so busy lamenting that we don't have something we used to have, that we forget God's blessings and even miss God giving us what we need now? Do we ever want to go back to a previous time, and remember it as being far better than it ever was?

I think we do.

It does not make those things that we used to have bad. The things that the Hebrews cried out for – fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic -- were good things. They are good things.

It does not mean that we won't have those things again. The Hebrew people had those things again, once they reached the Promised Land. They just did not have them when they were in the middle of the desert.

It does not even necessarily mean that the lack of those things now is a bad thing. The Hebrews had to go through a desert to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. That's not divine intervention; that's just geography.

The Hebrews also had to go through a change in their thinking. They had to stop trying to depend on Egyptian slave masters for what they needed, and start depending on God.

What are some things that the Church in America used to have, that we don't have any more? I'm not speaking here just about Westminster, but the larger Church in America.

It used to be, once upon a time, that all you had to do was put up a sign that said, “Church,” put an ad in the newspaper, and set out some folding chairs. You could rely on filling the hall. A basic social expectation in America was that everyone belonged to a church. Belonging to a church was part of the American identity.

Every church had its large choir, a Christmas pageant involving every child in the neighborhood, and serious trouble seating everyone on Easter Sunday.

Now, that is not so much.

Now, membership in the Protestant denominations in America is shrinking. Different denominations are more or less defensive about this, but it’s true. Some play games with statistics to make it look like they are not shrinking, but that doesn’t change reality. The Roman Catholic Church in America would be shrinking, except that they are gaining slightly more immigrants each year than the kids whom they lose.

As a society, Americans are less inclined to belong to organizations today than we were fifty or sixty years ago. Not just churches are shrinking, but fraternal and sororal organizations, Masonic organizations, even bowling leagues.⁴ This is not anybody’s fault; it is the nature of the country we live in today.

Having more people in the pews every Sunday would not be bad. An organization that has more people to do things can do more.

There is nothing to say that we will not have more people in the pews in the future. The Church is not dead, and, even if it were, we worship a Christ who was resurrected.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001).

It is not even necessarily the case that fewer people in the pews right now is completely a bad thing. We all know that you are here because you believe, not solely for what today we would call the networking opportunities.

We can no more go back to the 1950's than the Hebrew people could go back to Egypt. The United States is a different place than it was then, and no amount of wishing can change that.

Moses would remind the people, "Um, remember, you were slaves back there? Making bricks without straw?" Some would remind us that a world where women and racial and sexual minorities have more economic opportunities is a good thing. Some would remind us that a world where woman and racial and sexual minorities have less fear of violence is a good thing.

So, if the Church in America is in the wilderness today, what do we do about it?

Lamenting that we are in the wilderness is not going to change the situation. It just makes us look whiney.

So, we pay attention to what God is doing for us.

God provided Abraham the ram for the sacrifice.⁵

God provided Moses the power he needed to confront Pharaoh.⁶

God provided the Hebrew people manna in the wilderness.

God provided us with the living bread that came down from Heaven, Jesus Christ.

God will continue to provide us what we need.

⁵ Genesis 21, and WPC sermon "Behold the Lamb of God," September 7, 2017.

⁶ Exodus 2-3, and WPC sermon "Take the Staff," October 1, 2017.

We need to keep going.

Just as the Hebrew people had to keep walking through the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land, we must keep going.

We must keep feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner.

We must keep loving God and loving our neighbors, and doing practical things about that love.

We must keep teaching ourselves, our children, and our neighbors the story, of God and God's amazing love for God's people. All God's people.

The manna will be there.

The God who provided our ancestors what they needed, will continue to provide us what we need. But, like our ancestors, we need to keep moving forward.

No turning back.

No turning back.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN