

Promise in the Wilderness
Exodus 16: 2-8, 13-21
Matthew 4:1-4

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 16: 2-8, 13-21

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.”

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. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Matthew 4:1-4

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Last week, you remember, God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. It was an amazing rollercoaster experience. There were ten plagues. There was a pillar of cloud and a pillar of light, or flame. The sea parted in the middle to let the Hebrews walk through, and then came crashing back down to drown the Egyptian army that was chasing them.

One concern that a few Hebrews had brought up, before they left Egypt, was what were they going to eat and drink in the desert where God was sending them. At the time this was not entirely an unreasonable concern. The entire Egyptian civilization was built around the life-giving water of the Nile River. That was not only the water that the people drank – it allowed crops to grow. Without that water, the Egyptian empire could not have existed.

God was leading them into a desert, where there were no people to compete with them for land. The reason there were no people was that there was no water, and there was no plant life, or no significant plant life. No plant life means no food. My wife tells me that I start to get cranky after missing a meal or two. No meals at all would not be a good idea.

So the people who had wanted to go back to Egypt – you remember the go-back-to-Egypt committee, who asked Moses if they'd been brought out to the sea because of some shortage of grave space in Egypt? They were the ones who, when Pharaoh had the Hebrew people trapped against the sea, didn't want to turn to God. They wanted to just surrender immediately, and go back to being slaves in Egypt. These same people start to complain.

“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.”

We all know these people, don't we? The people who say everything today is terrible, and everything was always better in the past? Everything was better fifty years ago, or thirty years ago, or ten. It's not limited to long times. I have a friend who pastors a church plant, a brand-new congregation founded a few years ago from nothing, and she's had people tell her in confidence that the church was bigger and better two years ago, when video shows half the current attendance, than it is now.

These people also say that everything today is terrible. The members of the go-back-to-Egypt committee either don't see that they don't have Egyptian overseers whipping them and forcing them to work until they drop, or they take that for granted. Either they don't see that they are free to follow God's leading together as a people, or they take it for granted. They see this obstacle, and they assume that God and God's people can't solve it.

Today's go-back-to-Egypt committees tend to miss good things happening now, because they're too busy talking about how bad everything is. I see the whole Presbytery coming together for the coat drive as a good thing happening right here, right now. I see the discussions we're having with the school about a Community Garden as an example of God doing something new and wonderful right here on Schoolhouse Lane.

Now, some things may have been better, in some ways. And certainly, there was much in the past that was good. God has done good things in this world, and God's people have done good things in this world, over the centuries. There were good things in the past that we may or may not see again. The history of the world is not one uninterrupted march of steadily-accumulating progress toward perfection. That's not how it works. It's always a two-step forward, one step back kind of deal. Sometimes it's one step forward, two steps back.

That urge toward nostalgia is very human. We all have it. We all look back at the past and see what was good, and tune out what was bad. Particularly when we're looking back to our own childhoods, when our parents shielded us as best they could from the bad stuff, we all do that. When we do that, we may miss the good stuff that's happening now, because it's different from the good stuff that was happening then.

Every generation since Socrates has needed to be reminded that “the good ole days weren't / Always good / And tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems.”¹

The LORD responds to the go-back-to-Egypt committee and to the needs of the whole gathering. In a time when ordinary people can afford to eat meat only on special occasions, God covers the camp with quail for them to kill and eat. To go with the meat, God showers them with literal bread from heaven.

Manna is funny stuff. It defies our expectations. When the Hebrews first see it, they ask, “What is it?”, or, in Hebrew, “Man-huh?” That's where the name comes from. The people are told to gather an amount a little bigger than a two-liter bottle for each person,² but families that don't gather very much, have enough. Families that gather a whole lot, don't have any left over. Those families that manage to gather so much that they can't eat it all, find that it goes bad overnight. No place to plug in the refrigerator in the desert, you know?

And there's more on the ground the next morning.

So nobody had much more than they needed, but all the people had enough.

¹ Billy Joel, “Keeping the Faith,” *An Innocent Man*, 1983. Billy Joel was born in 1949, two years younger than my parents. He's talking about the 1950's and 1960's. The point is generally true, though.

² An omer is somewhere between 2.3 and 3.6 liters.

God provides the people with meat and with manna for forty years in the wilderness. They eat manna for so long that they get tired of it. They complain about it. But however much they complain, they have enough. And they learn to depend on God, rather than on their Egyptian overseers.

The Church in America today is in a desert.

Membership in church congregations is shrinking. As a society, Americans are less likely 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.³

Church attendance is shrinking across the religious and political landscape. High-profile failures of leadership in some denominations and large individual churches don't help matters. High-profile failures of trustworthiness don't help matters.

I've looked at a lot of those failures that the Church has had over the years.

Most of these failures have been placing trust in things other than God.

Covering up abuse, any kind of abuse, instead of tracking down all the abusers, preventing further abuse, and comforting the victims, is a failure to trust God. It is putting faith in the institution's finite ability to cover up a problem, rather than God's infinite ability to heal one. Countless people have been hurt by the Church doing that, whether we're talking about the Roman Catholic Church, Willow Creek, other megachurches, or any other church organization.

Claiming to align the Church or God with a political party, any political party, is a failure to trust God. It is placing trust in political power rather than in God. It is an attempt to substitute

³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001).

a human agenda, however well-intentioned, for God's plan for the world. It is at best a tragic example of hubris and a complete failure of humility, at worst a cynical power grab.

We are in the desert.

So where is God?

Where is the manna?

God is here.

God's out there, too.

But God is particularly here in this place. "Here in this place the new light is shining."⁴

And the manna's here, too.

This World Communion Sunday, we eat this bread and drink of this cup with literally millions of our brothers and sisters around the world, speaking every language known to humanity, as well as with all the Christians who have ever lived or will ever live.

Through this sacrament, we are gathered in, all peoples together, and called anew to be salt for the earth. We are called to eat this feast together, all of us, which is a gift of pure grace from God.

And then we're sent out, like the blood descendants of Abraham and Sarah, to be a blessing to all the peoples of the Earth. We are sent out to show those people out there that kind of grace.

⁴ Marty Haugen, "Here in this Place," Hymn #401, *Glory to God* hymnal. This was the opening hymn in worship this Sunday. There are several paraphrases from the hymn in the following paragraphs.

So have faith. We may be in the desert, but God is with us. And God will provide. What God provides us may not be what we expect, or what we would prefer, but God will provide us enough.

AMEN.