

Enough's Enough

Exodus 16:2-15; September 24, 2017

A Reading from the Book of Exodus

Chapter 16:2-15

In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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 stewpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death."

And the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion—that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not. But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day. So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "By evening you shall know it was the LORD who brought you out from the land of Egypt; and in the morning you shall behold the Presence of the LORD, because He has heard your grumblings against the LORD. For who are we that you should grumble against us? Since it is the LORD," Moses continued, "who will give you meat to eat in the evening and bread in the morning to the full, because the LORD has heard the grumblings you utter against Him, what is our part? Your grumbling is not against us, but against the LORD!"

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole Israelite community, 'Advance toward the LORD, for He has heard your grumbling.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they looked towards the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of the LORD.

The LORD spoke to Moses: “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Speak to them and say, ‘By evening you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

In the evening quail appeared and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew about the camp. When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness lay a fine and 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. And Moses said to them, “That is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs to eat, an omer to a person for as many of you as there are. . . .”

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Scribes say six weeks after crossing the Red Sea, many begin to ask, Where are we going? How far do we have to walk?

How long does this trip last?

What’s there to eat?

Forty days after watching those great walls of water swallow up Pharaoh’s army, people are starting to think about turning around, giving up.

Moses spent years hiding out in the desert until a burning bush tells him it’s time he help captive people break free. That’s not on his to-do list, though. Timidly, Moses pleads, Why’d you pick me? And, by the way, What is your name?

God’s reply has been translated various ways—usually, “I am who I am,” but the phrase also means I will become who I become.

I will be what people need me to be. . . .

The God we need when we’re lost in the wilderness may not resemble some white-bearded king watching what happens to us from a palace in the clouds. . . .

Once upon a time, the Nile Valley was the most fertile place in the world.

The Nile provided food in abundance. Pharaoh, the god-king, ruled over the Nile, and with a word, or with a glance, he could practically turn day into night.

Pharaoh's slaves took in so much grain, they needed whole cities to store it. Slaves built those cities, Pithom and Rameses, and they ate their fill.

Until Pharaoh got moody—these Jews were “fruitful” and they “multiplied.” He ordered midwives to drown the male infants. And mothers wailed. . . .

Yet not long after packing up, slipping away, fleeing the work gangs and the lash, many are saying, We would've been better off if we'd stayed.

Many are anxious about what lies ahead.

There's not much water, and there are snakes, jackals, and hyenas. Maybe, too, Pharaoh wasn't so terrible, not all the time.

Sometimes, Pharaoh was wonderful—charming, attentive, sorry for all the bad things he'd done. He brought us presents and made us feel valuable and deeply loved. . . .

Let me reframe this in case you missed something there.

How come my mother wouldn't leave my father? Why is it women go back to men who continually hurt them?

Because people get used to it. Many of us have been damaged in some way. Everyone I know, no matter what their address or income, has some issues, and for the most part, we keep the most painful hidden somehow.

What we witness growing up gets imprinted. We carry it with us the rest of our lives.

Why is it gifted and resourceful people—mainly though not exclusively women—keep getting drawn into volatile, abusive relationships?

Family history, at least in part. What makes you think you deserve any better? You can't survive without someone telling you what to do. No, no—you're weak, inept scared; you're scatter-brained. Pharaoh has all of the answers, the income—and his word is law.

Abusive partners—boyfriends, husbands—know exactly how to assert control, capturing women who've been hurt before or have low self-esteem. And they'll swear that they love their victims, don't you see, and promise to take care of them, but Pharaoh's got to have things his way; don't talk back. That's his demonic side. . . .

It's not easy to walk out of Egypt with nothing, not if you think there's nowhere else to go. Some feel they can't leave because there's too much to lose—children, the house, all of these assets and a certain lifestyle, mutual friends. Does it make sense to throw all that in jeopardy, run for the wilderness?

Today that wilderness means the unknown. . . .

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See how God responds here at the moment of panic, when so many tremble and want to turn back. We're going to starve, they quail, slavery was less frightening than this. God doesn't threaten, though. God doesn't scold. God says to Moses, "I will rain bread down for you from the sky. You may collect just enough every day, and I will see whether you'll live as you're meant to you, or not"

God says, I'm going to give you this chance—use it or lose it.

Here's this mysterious "bread."

The Israelites, of course, called it manna. Nowadays, manna suggests some unforeseeable but needed blessing rescuing us. One week before our son Michael was born, I got a check for a thousand dollars for a poem I'd written—an award from the Illinois Arts Council. We used that money to pay for his crib, changing table, new baby stuff. We were just scraping by, actually, and that fell from the sky. . . .

But the Hebrew term manna has a quirky history. It's a composite of two words, man hu, which is what people first said once they found it when they woke up. "Man hu" means "what is this?"—"What is this stuff?" Scholars have been trying to solve that riddle for hundreds of years.

Most agree it's a substance Bedouins still find out in the Sinai, bake into bread. These flakes are left there by bugs feeding on tamarisk trees. Plant lice consume plenty of sap to get the nitrogen that they need. They excrete the yellow-white sugary fluff, apparently. It breaks down fast; ants like it too, so you can't gather too much at a time.

One omer each—that's how much God promises to provide. How much is that?

Well, an omer is only about a tenth of an ephah. An ephah amounts to seventy-two logs. So much for weights and measurements in the Old Testament.

An omer's about the same size as two big soda pop bottles now.

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Let's be honest—it's not the "finest bread" our choir will sing about. Nothing like lobster or prime rib, no. I suspect it's the desert equivalent of ramen noodles, macaroni and cheese. Able to keep you alive until something else comes along.

Many of you have been there—after the break-up, after the bankruptcy, after the comfortable life you expected came apart.

Manna's not luxury. It's no more than bread for the journey—until you finish school, find a new job, start a new life. Until, at last, you find a way out of the wilderness. God will provide us with what we need—not what we want, all of the time. And there are rules we're expected to follow—wilderness rules:

Take no more than you need from the food pantry and from the Salvation Army; leave enough for others in distress, too.

No matter who we are, lots of us will have to crisscross a wilderness before we find the land promised to us. Scott Hoezee says each of us have to cross “zones of bereftness” when we lose someone, or wonder whether we ought to turn back.

Don't you think there are dozens of freshmen on campus afraid they've failed their first exams, worried and unsure, and—now that a month has passed—lonely and homesick?

The one who offers us food when we need it—food when we're hungry, in every sense—food for the ego, heart and soul—the one who feeds us these things demands our love and loyalty.

The key question is, Do we know where this food comes from? To those Egyptian slaves, the answer seemed to be bread comes from Pharaoh, who owns the fields. Pharaoh's got all of that wheat in his silos. His word is law.

In fact, Pharaoh can stand for much more than some long-ago, long-dead despotic king. Pharaoh's a label for all of the shady, unethical, cruel things we have to put with, pretend we don't see, so we can put 'bread on the table.'"

Pharaoh is the abusive parent, and the mean drunk and the boss who's a bully. Pharaoh is all that brainwashes you into believing, You don't deserve any better. I'll give you something to cry about! And, Don't you dare!

Let's pray for people escaping from slavery. Let's pray for people this week who are brave enough to make a run out to the wilderness—to spend six weeks or six months in a shelter with their two, three kids, until they're able to rent their own place. . . .

That's how the Exodus story gets re-enacted in every town, every day, and thank God it does.

There's an old Jewish prayer that declares, “Days pass, years pass, and we walk sightless among miracles.” This week, let's not let that stay true.

God bless you all.