

## *Manna and Mercy*

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Portions of Exodus 16

The Narrative Lectionary makes great leaps chronologically. It doesn't go chapter by chapter. Two weeks ago we were at the story of Jacob. Now we leap ahead perhaps 400 years to the Exodus. Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, through the parting of the Sea of Reeds and now they are in the wilderness heading to the Promised Land. They are being led by the Pillar of Cloud by day and the Pillar of Fire by night. They traveled for three days without finding any water. Then when they found some, it was bitter and undrinkable. The people complained to Moses, "What are we supposed to drink?"

So Moses cried out in prayer to God. God pointed him to a stick of wood. Moses threw it into the water and the water turned sweet. They moved on and then camped for a while near a nice oasis full of springs of water and palm trees. Then they moved on from there to an area called the Wilderness of Sin, which I know sounds like a scary midway ride or an X-rated movie, but the word "Sin" here does not refer to sinfulness. It is an untranslated word probably referring to the moon, so "Wilderness of the Moon." "Sin" is a short version of Sinai. At any rate, they are in the wilderness and it is now 45 days since leaving Egypt. They have eaten all the unleavened bread they brought with them and now they are out of food.<sup>2</sup> The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> The Israelites said to them, "We should have stayed in Egypt. At least we had food there; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve to death."

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days" ...

Jumping ahead to verse 13.

<sup>13</sup>In the evening huge flocks of quails came in and covered the camp; (meat to eat!) and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew dried, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, a tenth of a bushel for each person, all providing for those in their own tents.'" <sup>17</sup>The Israelites

did so, some gathering more, some less (depending on the size of their family). <sup>18</sup> But when they measured it . . . , those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. <sup>19</sup> And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” (Don’t save it up. Eat it now.) <sup>20</sup> But they did not listen to Moses; some hoarded and left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became stinky. And Moses was angry with them. <sup>21</sup> Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

<sup>22</sup> On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two tenths of a bushel apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, <sup>23</sup> he said to them, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord (now this is four chapters before the giving of the Ten Commandments and the official instituting of the sabbath); bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’” <sup>24</sup> So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become stinky, and there were no worms in it. <sup>25</sup> Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. <sup>26</sup> Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.”

<sup>27</sup> On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. <sup>28</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “For crying out loud! Follow my instructions. I gave you enough yesterday for today. Rest!” <sup>30</sup> So the people rested on the seventh day.

<sup>31</sup> The house of Israel called this substance manna, (which in Hebrew means “what is it?— which is what the Israelites said when they first saw it); it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

This is one of my favorite biblical stories. There are a lot of sermons in here. We’re going to do two, one today and one next week.

This lectionary reading is perfect for this first Sunday of our annual fall stewardship campaign. Note that we have renamed the Stewardship Committee the Gifts and Gratitude Committee.

Let’s walk our way through this fascinating story.

We’re in kind of a wilderness place right now in American society. So much is unsettled. “Toto, we’re not in Kansas any more.” We’ve not been here before.

Fresh out of Egypt the Israelites camped for a bit at Elim, sort of a posh KOA Campground, palm trees, swimming pool, tennis courts. And they had the food they brought with them,

the unleavened bread. Then the people left there and went farther into the wilderness. And soon they had eaten the last of the food from Egypt and they were unable to find other food. And they were hungry. Truly ravenous. People looked back fondly on their days in Egypt. Yes they were slaves. But they could eat. They cried out in complaint. They said they would rather have full tummies than freedom. They are ready to go back, to make a deal like Esau did in trading his birthright for some chicken noodle soup. They said, “We would prefer to die at an old age in slavery, rather than dying right now in freedom.”

A lot of sermons on this passage depict the Israelites as whiners, and I am tempted to do that, too...because...I ate breakfast. I have never been really, really hungry, afraid that my children would die of starvation. We have a 24-hour Cub Foods store a few blocks from our house and I always have enough money to buy food. Always. But I can imagine what it's like to be hungry, really hungry, because we see it almost every week, here at church. Someone comes to the church building who has not eaten for a day or two or three. So let us have some compassion for these folks.

The Bible says that God is putting them to a test. Do they trust God? Can they learn a new way of relating to food and to things and to each other and to God; different than the way they knew in Egypt?

My friend, Dan Erlander, wrote and illustrated this wonderful little condensed version of the Bible which he titled “Manna and Mercy.” I stole that title for the sermon today. We are using this little book as a Cliff's Notes help for us in the Discipleship 101 class on Wednesday evenings. (Let me make another plug for that class, because you can join the class any time. We're only in Exodus. We have 64 more books to go. This coming Wednesday we are taking a fresh look at the 10 commandments. In the class we don't presume you have ever seen a Bible before. You will never be asked to read aloud. Please come. For those of you who have been in the class, please invite one other person this morning to join us Wednesday: 5:45 supper, class from 6:15 to 7:15.)

Okay, back to Dan Erlander. He's the first one I heard say that the Israelites' 40-year sojourn was “Wilderness School.” God was using this as a time to teach them how to be a people and how to live in a new way, not the way of Egypt, and of all the other nations on earth—a new way of being, of trusting in God's daily provision.

So we learn a number of things in this story of the manna.

In the midst of the wilderness, in the midst of great challenges of life, God is PRESENT.

Second. Food security is a priority for God. (Dean McDonald) We can extrapolate that God wants it to be a priority for us, to make sure that our sisters and brothers do not go hungry. That's why as a congregation we are involved in Loaves and Fishes, in the Sheridan Project,

providing food for the weekend for Bloomington elementary school children, why we provide breakfasts at Simpson House for those who do not have a home, why we have money available through the Pastors' Discretionary Fund for emergency help in our community, why we support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance in times of famine, why we participate in the Crop Walk and so on. God does not want her children to be physically hungry.

Third. We are called away from self-sufficiency to trust in God. Daily. Jesus affirms the manna paradigm when his disciples ask him to teach them how to pray. He says, "Give us this day our daily bread." He does not say, "Give us a fat bank account and great pension plan so we are self-sufficient."

Henri Nouwen writes, "The pressure in our culture to secure our own future and to control our lives as much as possible does not find support in the Bible." Jesus knows our need for security. So he urges his followers to look for security where it can truly be found, not in things, but in God. Jesus said, "Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and (worms) destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. (Today we might say, "Thieves can hack in and steal.") But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor (worms) destroys them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matt 6:19-21)

Use your money to grow love. Let us invest in the eternal.

Fourth and finally, the emerging concept of Sabbath is woven throughout this passage. A time for rest, for enjoyment, with no need to work for food. God has provided already. God does not want us to be frantic at all, certainly not seven days a week. It is not God's intention that life is one big to do list.

So next week we will think together some more on this passage, very specifically.

Let us re-cap, last to first. 4. Sabbath. This commandment is not a harsh "Thou Shalt Not;" it's a gift. 3. Hoarding stinks. Trust in God, not Lehman Brothers. 2. God cares about food security; let us also be faithful in making food available for all. And #1, in the midst of the wilderness, in the midst of our daily challenges, our nightly challenges, God is there, God is here. Thanks be to God.