

## “Manna in Our Wilderness”

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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### Exodus 16:2-15 (NRSV)

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

[3] 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."

[4] 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. [5] On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." [6] 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, [7] 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?" [8] 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."

[9] Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.' " [10] 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. [11] The Lord spoke to Moses and said, [12] "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.' "

[13] In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. [14] 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. [15] 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.

## MURMUR

Our lesson for today begins with these words, “The whole congregation of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.” That word translated “murmured” in the King James version is a very interesting word. It literally means to “stay too long in one place.” We might say that someone is “hung up” on some problem.

Isn't that a good description of why some of us complain? We're “hung up” on some problem; we just keep going over and over our fears instead of moving on to something else.

Now, to be fair about it, the children of Israel had a legitimate fear. They were afraid that they would die a horrible death in the wilderness because they had no food. In my family if you can't

answer the “what’s for dinner” question you’re in big trouble. Can you imagine the anxiety you would feel if there was a possibility that your family might not get dinner again ever?

True, the children of Israel had just been liberated by the power of God and the leadership of God’s man, Moses. But, what good is freedom when there is no food on the table this evening?

And so they murmured. They complained. They said under their breath, “Why in the world did we ever follow this loser into the wilderness? We have made a terrible mistake.”

This was not an isolated incident. Throughout their journey in the wilderness the children of Israel murmur. They have God’s assurance that they are on the way to the Promised Land. But, the promise is not enough. They are always asking, “What have you done for me lately?”

They’re like children on a road trip shouting, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” They are not content to be on the road to the Promised Land. They want to arrive. They want to live in the land flowing with milk and honey right now. They don’t want to wait.

#### LONGING FOR EGYPT

And if their leaders can’t deliver on that promise, then maybe it would be better to go back to the old way of life. Maybe they should return to slavery in Egypt. At least in Egypt they had enough to eat. In their opinion maybe it was better to be a well fed slave than die free in the desert.

When we read the story of the Exodus we sometimes wonder why the Israelites were so short-sighted. God had just delivered them from the greatest military power of the ancient world. He had parted the waters of the Red Sea. But, now we find them complaining about their leadership.

If God were able to deliver them from the Egyptians could God not also be trusted to deliver them from hunger in the wilderness?

But, the people could not make that connection. When it came to God’s salvation they had a very short memory. They were truly (as a politician said of us recently) a nation of whiners.

No wonder Moses often lost patience with these people. They often acted like a bunch of spoiled brats, and Moses felt like a frustrated father. He prayed, “Lord, do something with these people? I can’t listen to their complaints any more.”

Even God got fed up with the complaints of the people and realized that they weren’t ready for the Promised Land. They would have to wander in the desert for forty years more years.

#### LOCAL MURMURING

This week I've heard a lot of murmuring in my congregation. Some people wonder if we won't be wandering in the wilderness pretty soon. Some have been wondering out loud if they'll have a job in the near future. Some have seen their financial nest egg shrink considerably.

The unwarranted exuberance on Wall Street has given way to unwarranted panic and fear. I liked what a mother who is just short of retirement wrote to her son, "Can I have your shirt? I just lost mine."

The concern is real. People are losing their homes and their livelihoods. No one seems to know when it will all end. The politicians want to blame it all on the other party. The bailout for this debacle might cost our nation 500 billion dollars.

But, the fault is not just with the politicians or the folks on Wall Street. There is plenty of blame to go around. We wanted to get to the Promised Land too quickly and without any struggle. We as a society have let greed dictate our actions instead of common sense and hard work. And now all of us are paying the price.

In addition to our financial woes the news on the international front is not too good either. We're involved in armed conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq. There was a bombing of the US embassy in Yemen. Our relations with Russia suggest we're entering a new kind of cold war.

Each week there is something new to worry about. No wonder the people are murmuring. I have a friend who has chosen the ostrich approach. He says that he's been sleeping a lot better since he swore off TV news completely. That might not be a bad approach. That might work if the preacher didn't mention these problems in his sermon!

But, we all know that there will come a time when we will have to face the facts and our fears.

#### A THEOLOGICAL ANSWER

How will we deal with the threats that come our way? How do we respond when we find ourselves in the wilderness with nothing to eat? How do we comfort family and friends when we see that they have lost hope and fear is beginning to overcome faith?

I believe that every problem in life has a theological as well as a political and economic answer. When we have a problem instead of just complaining about our leaders or trying to place blame, we should try to find God in all this mess.

The question we need to ask is, "Where is God when we find ourselves in the wilderness?"

The answer that the Bible gives is that God is with us ... especially when we're in the wilderness. When times get tough God provides for us in ways that increase our faith and remind us of what is really important.

God's people have always used the past to interpret the present. They have remembered how God delivered his people from captivity and the wilderness in the past as a way of finding hope and courage for the living of these days. That's why we read this ancient story about the salvation of God's people.

We believe that it's not just a story about people that God saved way back when. We also believe that it's our story.

One of the big problems with our society is that we tend to have a short memory. We don't tell the stories of salvation and how God has delivered us in the past. We only worry about the current problem and anxiously look to our leaders for answers.

But, in our lesson for today we learn that sniping at our leaders often betrays a lack of faith. Moses told the children of Israel that their complaining was misplaced. "Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."

As a pastor I have noticed that this is often true. When people begin to murmur and get hung up on little things, they are not really angry with me or with the leadership of the church. They are really mad at God. God has not come to their rescue in the way that they had hoped. They have a hunger that had not been fed, and so they complain.

#### A HEAVENLY COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT

The answer is to direct their complaint toward heaven. Go to God with your fears.

One of the remarkable things about Scripture is that God's people feel free to complain. A seminary professor opened one of his classes by reading a Psalm of Lament from a contemporary translation of the Bible. And one of the students not knowing that this was from the Bible said piously and indignantly, "I don't think those things should be said to God in prayer!"

The professor revealed the source of his prayer and then said that the people of the Bible were "so close to God, so tight with God, so confident in God's good will for them, that they can say whatever is on their mind when they talk to God."

Do you go to God with whatever is on your mind? Do you trust God enough to complain to God when things go wrong? Or, do you always complain to your leaders?

Don't misunderstand. Those of us who lead quite often deserve criticism. We can show poor judgment and lead our people in the wrong direction.

But, I think that when a leader has a problem it is for the same reason that the people have a problem. We are looking about and not up. We are trying to find deliverance from our problem in what we can do and say and not in what God calls us to do and say.

That's why all of us begin our search for salvation not on main street or Wall Street or even in Washington. We are a people of the Book, God's Book. And look for deliverance in God's story.

In the stories of God's deliverance in the past that we find our cue for how God might deliver us in the future.

To put it another way, our ultimate hope is not in a political or economic fix. Our ultimate hope is in the promise of bread from heaven, the providential care of God which stretches from creation until the end of days.

#### WHAT ARE WE FEEDING UPON?

The big question that is asked over and over again in the Bible is this: "What are you feeding upon?" Are we feeding upon our fears or are we feeding upon the bread of heaven, the Word of God?

It is our job in these uncertain times to model what it is like to feed upon God's promises instead of fear. We, as the people of God are to feed each day upon the belief that God will indeed give us this day our daily bread. And that is enough. God's provision is sufficient for us.

One member of my Bible study remembered the great depression. She said that like so many people during that time her father lost his job. But, despite all the uncertainties her mom said, "God will take care of us."

And He did. Not only did the family have enough food for themselves her mom was able to feed the homeless people (the Hobos as they called them back then) who would come around looking for something to eat.

Sometimes older people tell me that they don't have anything to offer any more. Their life is almost over, and they feel a sense of despair.

But, I would contend that you have more to offer the community than anyone else. You can tell us personal stories of faith like this. You can tell us how God delivered you from the wilderness. You can remember how God was with you and yours in the tough times. And in doing this you not only give hope to those who do not have your experience; you also give meaning to the living of your days.

We should listen to the stories of people who have been through the wilderness. They are the prophets in our midst who can testify to the provision of God during the tough times. Instead of feeding ourselves a steady diet of despair and dissatisfaction we should dwell upon the stories of faith and hope.

You see, the stories of faith are not only the stories in the Bible but also personal stories in which we learned first hand about the joy of God's daily provision.

I would encourage you to find someone who has such a story to tell, and I would encourage you to think back on your own life with this theme in mind. Has there been a time in your life when

God delivered you from some slavery? Has there been a time in your life when God fed you in the wilderness? Claim that story. Tell that story. And use that story as a guide for the future.

Over time the daily provision of God strengthens our faith. We find the courage to quit murmuring and move on. Instead of being hung up on our problems, our problems become an impetus to move forward with God.

## SALVATION IN THE WILDERNESS

I think it's interesting that God's people loathed the wilderness experience while they were going through it, but it was the wilderness that really taught God's people to trust and obey. It was God's provision in the wilderness that made the journey to the Promised Land possible.

In fact when the theologians and historians of Israel looked back on those wilderness days they saw those hard years as a kind of golden age. The presence and power of God was easier to see in the wilderness. And they longed for that time when their connection to God would once again be that direct and powerful.

Perhaps that's why John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus has his ministry in the wilderness and Jesus is often portrayed as going into the wilderness to combat Satan and seek the will of God.

The wilderness was a powerful symbol of God's presence and grace.

When I look back on my life I see the same pattern. Though I would never purposely seek the wilderness, it has been during those really tough times in the wilderness that my faith has been strengthened and confirmed. When I was in the wilderness God spoon fed me so to speak. In the wilderness I learned that to trust the goodness of a mighty God who cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

We can only graduate from school if we pass the test, and in a more profound way the same is true when it comes to faith. The test of the wilderness will always play a crucial role in faith development.

It's in the wilderness that we develop a hunger for manna, the bread of heaven. It's in the wilderness that we can learn to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." It's in the wilderness that we learn to do it God's way instead of doing it our way.

## THE TEST

In verses 4 and 5 of today's lesson we read that the Lord told 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. [5] On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

We read later in the Bible that some of the people failed the test. Some tried to gather more than a day's worth of manna, and the bread from heaven spoiled. Only on the Lord's Day could they gather a little extra so that they could observe a day of rest.

In the same way what we have been given by God is not only a blessing but also a test, a test of faith. Do we believe that what we have is ours to be hoarded and protected at all costs? Or do we believe that all that we have is a blessing from God to be shared and used for God's glory?

Maybe bad economic times serve the function of showing us the error of our ways. Our money bears the phrase, "In God we trust." But, we must remember that money is not our God!

Jesus told us that God knows that we need food and clothing and the necessities of life. But, our life is more than food and clothing. We should not be anxious about these things. If God can feed the birds and cloth the grass of nature in a fashion that rivaled the glory of King Solomon, then God can be trusted to give us our daily bread.

In the first century, the apostle Paul was taking up a collection for needy Christians in the Jerusalem church. And his appeal to the churches of the ancient world was based upon this very story of the manna. (See 2 Corinthians 2:8-15) The way bread is distributed in the story of the manna is a model for the way the church is to distribute goods. "Everyone is to have enough, but no one has too much."

In other words we are to gather God's blessings with an attitude of faith. If God gives us what we need every day there is no need to hoard. Indeed, anxious hoarding can lead to spoiled food and more importantly a spoiled life.

To put it another way, instead of feeding our fear we should feed our faith. We should learn to seek first God's kingdom with the assurance that all of these other things that we need will be provided to us. (Matthew 6:32-33)

## EEYORE

Whenever I think about those who murmur those who grumble their way through life I think about Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh. Whenever there was a problem he would respond with despair and his trademark phrase, "O Brother." No matter what he wanted to happen, poor Eeyore knew that it would go wrong, and it usually did. And so he went through life with his head down and his tail between his legs.

That's the problem when we live our life murmuring. Our head is down. We look for answers in the wrong place. And the bad things we expect often come true.

Are you an Eeyore? Are you always murmuring about what you don't have instead of giving thanks for what you do have? Are you always blaming others for the problems in your life?

I would suggest that now is the time to start the journey out of the wilderness. Instead of always looking down, we need to be looking up. Instead of counting our problems we should be counting our blessings.

All of us have a hunger inside us that even the blue plate special won't satisfy. But, God can satisfy us. There is a bread that comes from heaven and a hope that endures forever.

This morning let us take to heart the words of a favorite hymn, "Bread of heaven, bread of heaven ... feed me 'till I want no more. Feed me 'till I want no more."

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN](#)