

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 were 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 shortsighted. 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.

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 wilderness for forty years. Sometimes we too have to wander in the wilderness for a while because we do not trust the good news that God brings us.

FAITH AND THE WILDERNESS

Each week we hear a lot of murmuring. I watched the evening news this past week and more than half of that thirty minute broadcast was a rehearsal of our dissatisfaction.

People are profoundly dissatisfied with their leadership these days. They are dissatisfied with Congress. They are dissatisfied with the President. They are dissatisfied with just about everything.

We can understand why. Many are out of work. Home prices continue to plummet. There is a chance that financial irresponsibility in Europe will cause yet another worldwide recession.

The litany of woe goes on and on.

No wonder people are murmuring. We have been in this economic wilderness for a long time. And what do our leaders do? They argue over things that petty matters while things get worse.

I don't have a political solution for all this mess. But, I do have a theological solution. I believe God has a special message for us when we find ourselves in the wilderness, economic or otherwise.

The Bible reminds us that though we are in the wilderness God is with us and God promises to care for us. When times get tough God provides for us in ways that increase our faith. In fact, it's often in the wilderness that we remember what is really important.

God's people have always used the past to interpret the present. We remember 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. We believe their story informs our story.

Sometimes we don't make this vital connection between the past and the present. We only worry about the current problem and anxiously look to our leaders for answers. And when our leaders don't deliver, we murmur.

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."

WHAT ARE WE FEEDING UPON?

What about us? Are our complaints misplaced? Are we listening to voices of discontent or are we listening to the Word of God? Are we feeding upon our fears or are we feeding upon the bread of heaven?

In our lesson for today the God's people were feeding upon their fears. They were focusing upon the wilderness instead of the mighty acts of God that had led them out of slavery.

When the Israelites murmured against their leaders, the Bible tells us they were really murmuring against God. They doubted the goodness of God.

They were accusing God of wanton cruelty. Why did God lead us into the wilderness to die of hunger? At least in Egypt we had three square meals a day.

So, what was the response of this allegedly cruel God? Did God judge them for their shortsighted ways?

No, God gave them something to eat. God fed his people. God responded to their lack of faith with a sign of His steadfast love. God gave them manna from heaven. God met their faithless ways with a sign of eternal hope.

The story of the Exodus is another story of the incarnation. In the wilderness of life God is with us. God does not always take us out of the wilderness as we might wish. Instead, God feeds us in the wilderness. God gives us what we need when we need it.

But, we have to be alert. Bread from heaven is different from regular bread. The people did not know what that the white, gummy substance on the ground was God's gift. When they saw it they asked a question, "Manhu?" In Hebrew that means, "What is it?" And that's where we get the word manna.

The people are confused. They did not recognize this sticky white substance as a sign of God's promise. And yet this odd sticky substance was what they had been praying for. It was manna. It was bread from heaven.

I wonder. Where is the manna in our life? What is it in our life that feeds our faith instead of our fears?

The story suggests that we might not recognize the sign of God's care, at least not at first. The glory of the Lord comes in some unusual ways. And sometimes we don't understand, at least not immediately what God is doing with us.

God's salvation is always near, but it is not always clear. And so like God's people of old we ask, "What is it?" What is God doing in my life today? Where is the food that God promised?

Like the Israelites of old we must learn to trust in the fact that God is good. God is with us and for us. God provides our daily bread. We must learn to "taste and see" that the Lord is good. (Psalm 34:8)

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 will be sufficient for us.

STORIES FROM THE WILDERNESS

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 the elderly have more to offer the community than anyone else.

You can tell us personal stories of faith. 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 these 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.

Let me give you a few examples.

Sharon was a single parent mom who had total responsibility for supporting and raising her two children. Fortunately Sharon had a good job, but it required a great deal of travel. However it did allow her to provide for her family in a comfortable way.

That changed. One day she got the news that her company had gone through reorganization. She had been demoted and offered a much less prestigious job with a lower salary.

Her pastor said, "Oh Sharon, this is terrible." But, Sharon replied, "Not exactly. My other job was great. The money was good. But, it required too much travel. I was away from my children too much. The money enabled me to do things for my children. But, they need me more than money."

Maybe this is not a disaster. Maybe it is an opportunity. I can spend more time at home. We can learn to get by on less money."

When Sharon's life changed she asked the question that the Israelites asked when they saw the manna. "What is it?" Is this a disaster or is it an opportunity? Through the eyes of faith she found manna, a gift from God, bread from heaven.

During this time of financial recession a church struggled with a radical drop in giving. The treasurer said, "The church is facing the greatest financial crisis in our five decades of existence. We are going to have to cut staff, pull back on our expenses and see what we can salvage."

But, the next elder who spoke had a different view. He said, "One of the slogans of my company has been using these days is 'a financial crisis is a terrible thing to waste.' Is this really a time of despair? Or is this a time to make big decisions?"

Maybe this crisis is forcing us to ask what is really important in this church. Maybe this is God's way of getting us to listen for what He wants instead of always focusing upon what we want."

What is it? Is this downturn in the economy a disaster for the church? Or is this a God-given opportunity to experience the grace of God in a fresh way? Through the eyes of faith, this particular church was able to see manna in the wilderness.

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. It was in the wilderness that the people experienced the power and salvation of God.

Perhaps that is why Jesus is often portrayed as going into the wilderness to combat Satan and seek the will of God. In the wilderness all pretense is stripped away, and we learn what we really believe.

In this way the wilderness was seen not only as a place of despair and deprivation. It became 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, I have found that during those really tough times in the wilderness my faith has often 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 doing one of the first stewardship programs. He 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."

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 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)

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? Do you feel stuck in the wilderness?

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 bread that comes from heaven and a hope that endures forever.

So, when the deprivation of the wilderness comes into our life let us learn to ask the question that the Israelites asked long ago, "Manhu?" What is it?

Could it be manna? Could God be giving us bread from heaven today?

In surprising ways God still enters our life and gives us what we need when we need it.

God give us eyes to see the manna. Help us taste and see you are good.

Amen.