

Doubt in the Wilderness
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Date: September 21, 2014

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“Doubt in the Wilderness” Pilgrim Church UCC, September 21, 2014 (Exodus 16:2-15)

One of my favorite characters on Saturday Night Live was Debbie Downer played by Lexington native Rachel Dratch. Debbie would be present at parties and events and would always find a way to bring her friends and family down by changing the subject of conversations to something negative and often tragic. At Walt Disney World, one of the happiest places on earth, the whole family is eating breakfast and deciding how they will spend their day. Someone exclaims that they just love Mickey’s Steak and Eggs and Debbie responds, “Ever since they found mad cow disease in the US, I’m not taking any chances. They say it can live in your body for up to three years before it attacks and destroys your brain.” And every time Debbie Downer delivers one of these lines you hear the sad trombone sound. You see her poor family member about to happily eat his steak and eggs looking all crest-fallen that she had to go talking about mad cow disease. But then Pluto comes up and hugs Debbie, what a sweet moment. Debbie says, “Oh, hi Pluto. It must be really fun working at Disney. Although at any major theme park, you live in constant threat of terrorist attacks.” Naturally, poor Pluto gets dejected, hangs his head, and slowly walks away from all that negativity.[1]

I appreciate Debbie Downer as a fictional character because I think we’ve all encountered real Debbie Downers in our lives. Everything is going well and there’s good momentum and along comes Debbie Downer to suck the life out of a room, wreck the mood, and just generally make a joyful atmosphere uncomfortable by crazy exclamations of negativity. It can be very frustrating in families, circles of friends, workplaces, churches, and organizations to have someone who constantly exhibits contrary behaviors.

Debbie Downer was at the forefront of my mind as I was reading about the Israelites complaining in the Wilderness in Exodus. Now we skipped a week because of the Service of Blessing, but we heard about Passover and God promising to deliver the people out of slavery in Egypt. God keeps God’s promise—the people are delivered and God is just beginning to lead them onto the Promised Land. Freedom notwithstanding, it doesn’t take long for them to turn on their leaders Moses and Aaron. We hear, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”[2] Well here we go, here are a bunch of Debbie Downers about to wreck everything because they can’t see the forest for the trees. Okay they’re lost, but they’re free. Come on!

What are they complaining about? Food. They’re complaining about not having enough to eat. “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.”[3] It’s not like their fate is certain and their future is just so bright they have to wear shades. Life hasn’t become that much easier. Even if they were oppressed, at least in Egypt they knew what their lives entailed and they had some guaranteed food to eat, whether it was provided or whether they had gardens and did some harvesting themselves. Having a home and food, now that’s almost a luxury compared to where they are now.

So here’s the ultimate question before us today: are we dealing with a bunch of Debbie Downers whining in the Wilderness, completely ungrateful for God’s gifts or are we dealing with starving people, lost and afraid with uncertain futures?

Before I tell you more, there's a story here first. My dad was my Assistant Principal in Middle School and sometimes to avoid riding the bus, I would hitch a ride to school with him at like 5 in the morning, torturously early. My dad would open up the gym for me and I'd practice basketball before school started, shooting around on my own though he would occasionally join me for epic foul shot competitions. The first morning I ever went in early with him, I finished shooting and headed up to his office only to smell freshly cooking, probably delicious bacon. Naturally I had to investigate and see who had bacon in the cafeteria because maybe I could have some? I poked my head in only to discover about 30 kids or so, many of whom I knew, eating breakfast together.

As soon as they saw me, several looked incredibly uncomfortable and I instantly knew that I wasn't supposed to be there. When I got to my dad's office I asked what's up with that breakfast downstairs? I smelled bacon and I've just been shooting for awhile and I'm starving over here, and could use some food but it didn't seem like I was welcome. He patiently explained that those kids are part of a program to provide free and reduced breakfasts and lunches for low-income families and that I should always be respectful of many of them wanting their families' situations to be private. Now my hometown is not terribly fancy and most folks are happily part of the Middle Class—normal, average American families where we tend to have most things we need but not everything we want. So to think that I had classmates who were well below where the rest of our families were economically when most people in Wadsworth weren't affluent in the least, hit me hard. To think that I had classmates who couldn't grab a bowl of cereal in the morning because they didn't have much food in the house so they had to get to school early to be sure they had breakfast—well, it's my first memory of dealing with class privilege.

This situation is not unique to Wadsworth, Ohio. Some statistics from 2013: 1 out of 5 kids live in households in America without consistent access to adequate food. 22% of kids under the age of 18 live in poverty. 11 million low-income children receive free or reduced school breakfasts and 21 million low-income children receive free or reduced school lunches.[4] And having food in our stomachs when we are learning in school matters. In fact there's been studies that kids score 17.5% better on standardized math tests when they've started the day with a healthy breakfast. Finally, 9 out of 10 public school teachers who teach Kindergarten-8th Grade will tell you that eating a healthy breakfast is key to academic achievement.[5]

Food enables kids to grow and learn and thrive and access to healthy food should always be on our radar as a society because kids going hungry hurts all of us in the end. Actually in Zambia when we taught with Communities Without Borders we took a snack break every day and each child received a couple of crackers in the middle of our lessons. Those crackers weren't much, but at least those kids had something to eat and would hopefully find it easier to learn in school. There's a correlation here to kids who have some food to sustain them and how well they can learn in school and how healthy they can become as growing young people.

So to actually answer the question, I don't buy this story from Exodus as just a bunch of Debbie Downers complaining in the Wilderness, ungrateful for the gift of freedom God gave them. On some self-righteous days I can certainly take particular glee that the whole congregation is rising up in complaints against poor, saintly Aaron and Moses—what a bunch of whiners!

Instead, maybe they're hungry people with uncertain futures who are afraid of what's next. They're being led by Moses and Aaron, two brothers who are so early in trying to lead. They don't trust one another yet. They're setting off on a long desert march without any survival skills and hardly any supplies. It's like setting a person who's always grown up in the relative

safety of the suburbs out on the edge of a sparse landscape and saying “Good luck, have a great trip!” Of course they panic—wouldn’t you? I would!

But here’s the coolest thing in the story—God provides. God provides quail and manna and water to drink to sustain the people. It was Gandhi who once said, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” We may not get this whole God raining down bread from heaven, but can we see that for a truly hungry person, having a meal somehow provided could be heavenly? That somehow God is there in the form of that bread?

This is where it gets interesting for us—there are people starving all over the world. There are kids who if they are fortunate enough to be in school, may have a really hard time learning on empty, growling stomachs. Here in Lexington we have the Lexington Food Pantry and Lift Up Lexington who both help with hunger here—there are hungry kids here as well and our community continues to respond.

You know, I really wish that God could just rain down some bread and quail and water from heaven. But whether it happened like this or not, this story is still true—God provides for us and God doesn’t want us to hoard God’s blessings. We’re only supposed to gather up the bread we need for that day—give us this day our daily bread—and maybe we don’t keep much more bread than we need. We can trust that if God can provide once, God can provide again and again and again. And you know what else this story shows? You know what else is true? God cares about access to food. God cares about hungry people. God cares about the plight of the poor.

On the earthly level—maybe we can provide the bread and this is also heavenly. Maybe we can help God feed the world and heal the sick and stay with the heartbroken. Maybe we do it knowing that the places in our lives where we think there is only death and thirst and fear and despair are actually the very places where we can see glimpses of our Loving God.[6] May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Quotes for Debbie Downer, from Saturday Night Live, <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0236324/quotes>

[2] Exodus 16:2.

[3] Exodus 16:3.

[4] No Kid Hungry Facts Sheet, 2013 Statistics, <http://www.nokidhungry.org/pdfs/Facts-Childhood-Hunger-in-America-2013-g...>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Dean McDonald, Homiletical Perspective of Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3, 293.