

Manna

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Scripture Reading

Exodus 16:2-16, 31-32

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The 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. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' ⁶So 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, ⁷and 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?' ⁸And 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." ' ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The 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. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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. ¹⁶This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." ' '

31 The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. ³²Moses said, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt." '

Prayer

Sermon

From the earliest times, we have been travelers, pilgrims, people on the move.

And from the earliest times, God has been in covenant with us.

The first people in the Bible journeyed - Adam and Eve out of the garden; Abraham and Sarah to a new land; Joseph who brought a blessing out of a tragedy, brought his family to Egypt to survive the famine.

When Joseph died, the people, far from abundance, were enslaved in Egypt, by a king who did not know Joseph, by the death dealing ruler Pharaoh moved by greed and fear. The people's lives were made bitter, Exodus tells us.

But God, not for the first time and not for the last, heard the cries of the enslaved and oppressed people. God heard them, remembered the covenant promise from back to the day so Noah, and God saw the people. Exodus 2:25: "God looked at the Israelites, and God understood." (Common English Bible) Robert Alter translates, "and God knew."¹ And God knew, and God understood, and God was with the people, calling them to another journey, this one of liberation.

Moses, who was saved in infancy by Miriam and Shiphrah and Puah - Moses, who met God in the burning bush - Moses and Miriam and Aaron were called by God to lead this new journey, a journey across a sea and into a new land. A journey that began with liberation.

The people traveled through an oasis at Elim and onward, into the wilderness, dry and parched.

¹ Alter, Robert. The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary.

Wildernesses are as common in scripture as journeys.

This wilderness, this liminal space, this place between here and there, I've spent a minute there. Have you?

Wilderness means many things in scripture and story.

I love a good wild moment, with trees and trails and moss and skittering chipmunks, but wilderness in scripture is a place of - a symbol of - disruption. The people were emerging from a familiar if oppressive life in Egypt. And they found themselves lost. Disrupted. With no landmarks to guide them. This journey seemed to be taking them out of control. They wondered if they could possibly survive. At least in the old familiar Egypt there was food. If not freedom, there was survival. Except - there wasn't really - in Egypt their children were worked to death. But in the wilderness, they forgot. In the wilderness, they lost hope. In the wilderness, they lost direction. They forgot God's covenant promises. And they called out to God. God heard them. God saw. God, who had loved them and covenanted with them, responded to their cries, even their cries of anger from the midst of their wilderness. Because God has been in loving relationship with them - with us - from all the way back to Adam and Eve.

It was hard for the people to hold on to that, though, in the midst of the wilderness.

This wilderness, this place of disruption, this place between here and there, I've spent a minute there. Have you? I wonder if that describes the last eighteen months, even. Let me say, I don't know how the Israelites made it forty years!

There's a wilderness we're still walking through.

It started 18 months ago, so suddenly most of us couldn't pack our spiritual bags. It was supposed to just be a couple of weeks, do you remember? We just grabbed what we thought we'd need for a little time at home...and I know folks who haven't been back to their offices yet. Our lives are still changed, we are still navigating a wilderness. We have thought several times now, just around that corner, we'll be out, and it just might be. But I remember one Pilgrim saying to me in March of 2020: we're going to be in this wilderness a long time. Even as we have returned to work, to school, to seeing friends and family - nothing is quite the same. Many of us have lost loved ones, and seen loved ones sicker than they've ever been before. And a mirror has been held up to a world that wasn't working for a lot of people - yet we don't quite know how to fix it. There's been fear, anxiety, grief, and anger. We have endured what a friend of mine calls a species-wide trauma. Maybe we've been calling out to God, how long O Lord?

In Bible Study this week we talked about psalms of honesty: honest prayers offered up to God. Our group remembered that if our ancestors in faith could faithfully call out to God is pain and fear, anxiety and anger - so can we.

In this morning's story, our ancestors in faith found themselves liberated and then lost in the wilderness. And they cried out.

And the Lord heard them, remembered them, saw them. The Lord knew.

"In the midst of their fear, anxiety and doubt, God does not reprimand. God provides."²

And each day, there was manna, just enough, bread for the day.

Y'all, in the wilderness, there has been manna, just enough. We've had just enough. It means something that we've been a community of blessing that has gotten through this wilderness: we've been here for each other, and God has walked with us all the way. From worship to care packages to birthday parades to that Christmas pageant to the Pumpkin Patch to - and yes, that's been a blessing twice now. From the Spring of 2020 when your church leadership said: We will figure out Zoom worship and we will keep it going so wherever you are in the country you can be with us. And we did. We will figure out how to keep all our staff - no layoffs. And we did. We will offer care to our folks. And we did. We're going to keep helping out neighbors. And we did. We didn't know quite how we'd do it, but the truth is we didn't do it on our own. We've never been alone. God has been with us in this wilderness.

I've been listening to a program about the church in this Wilderness time, and I heard a good word about the Exodus of long ago, and the wilderness of today: "God says trust me. The reason you can trust me is you do not travel alone. I, the God who freed you from Pharaoh, travels with you."³

It is so very tempting to say, let's head back to Egypt. Let's head back to life before March 2020. Instead, God - whose manna will provide - is calling us forward, to a future that is different, a future with hope.

I think in this moment we are beginning to see once more a future with hope. It will not be the same as it was. It cannot be the same as it was. I hope on a global scale, it's a future marked by racial justice, climate justice, economic justice - and we must work for

² https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003a20/a_wilderness_people_in_the_promised_land

³ <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/resources/podcasts/wilderness-time-podcast/>

that. Locally, here at Pilgrim, I believe we are on the cusp. A future with hope is right in front of us, from - dare we hope - a new preschool - to - dare we hope new mission partnerships - to - dare we hope - hybrid Christmas Eve?

However this next season unfolds, God is with us. There's manna and there's a future with hope. We're going to be talking about that future all month, because we need all of us to build that hopeful future.

Over and over again, God has offered daily bread. Bread for today, for a people journeying through wilderness. And God knows, and God understands, and God is with us, calling us forward on our journey, toward a future with hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.