

Exodus 16

1 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?"

8 Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD." 9 Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'"

10 While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud. 11 The LORD said to Moses, 12 "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"

13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. 16 This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'"

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

19 Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." 20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them. 21 Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

22 On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much-- two omers for each person-- and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. 23 He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.' 24 So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it.

25 "Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. 26 Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any." 27 Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none.

28 Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? 29 Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." 30 So the people rested on the seventh day.

31 The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. 32 Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt.'" 33 So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be kept for the generations to come." 34 As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna in front of the Testimony, that it might be kept.

35 The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

36 (An omer is one tenth of an ephah.)

After God's people celebrate their miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea, their path turns toward the desert, into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, an area now part of northeastern Egypt. The Sinai is truly a desert area, receiving less than 6 inches of rain per year! As you might guess, there is very little water there to drink, and not a lot of food to eat. Never the less, it is into this barren region God that leads his people.

As you can imagine, it doesn't take long before folks start grumbling, and it's not long before complaints start to find their way to Israel's leaders, to Moses and his brother Aaron. God's people are hungry, and they want to know what's going to be done about it. As their hunger grows sharper, so do their questions, they begin to wonder, "Why, why did you do this crazy thing to us anyway? Why have you led us here – just to kill us?" As their belts cinch tighter, their memory of Egypt, of their oppression, their enslavement, fades further and further into the past. Just two and a half months after their rescue, Israel is ready to turn back to Egypt – food in chains began to look much more tempting than famine in freedom, or wherever it was that Moses and Aaron and God were leading.

And so begins an important lesson for God's people, then and today; just because God has saved you, just because you've seen God's deliverance, God's mighty hand fight for you, it doesn't mean that life's a cake-walk from that moment on.

Instead, as Israel will discover, salvation and deliverance is where the real adventure, and perhaps, the real challenge, starts.

When God proves his faithfulness, when God fulfills his promises and frees us from the hand of our enemies, we know that the only worthy response is to recognize God's power and dominion, that we must submit ourselves and our lives in grateful thanks.

That's all God asked of the Hebrews, that they would know and believe that God was, the great I AM. Bringing them out of Egypt, God gave his people a new life, a new chance to live for him, to live with him, just God and his people, forever bound to each other, sharing blessing and praise, honor and worship. And as part of this new relationship, God asked his

people to hand over control – for them to slide into the passenger seat and to let God take hold of the wheel.

Of course that's where following God gets tough. Like Israel soon discovered, God may lead you into the desert, lead you into the hungry places, the dry places, the forsaken places. And when God does, that's when fear and doubt comes creeping in, tempting you to look back and wonder, “Is this God really worth it? Life before may not have been perfect, but I least I knew what to expect. I don't know where I'm headed now – what if this whole God thing is really just a shimmering desert mirage?”

Forgetting how God fought for them in Egypt, bringing plague after plague upon their captors, forgetting that God parted the sea before them, that God closed the waters after them, burying their enemies in a watery grave, the Israelites let simple hunger shake their faith to its roots. Not knowing where their next meal would come from made these witnesses to some of God's most amazing miracles and displays of strength want to trade it all in – God and his promise – in exchange for a happy meal and extra fries.

In his commentary on Exodus, Terrence Fretheim observes, “How common it is among the people of God that a crisis, whether of daily need or physical suffering, occasions a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual well-being are more closely linked than we often care to admit. The discernment of the people of God has often been so clouded by physical difficulties that they cannot see that God is much involved in providential ways in their everyday lives. Israel's situation is not unlike a community of faith whose understanding of “act of God” has been largely determined by their insurance policies. The connection of God with daily affairs has, for all practical purposes, disappeared.”¹

What was true for Israel then, is also true for us, God's people today. How little does it take to shake our faith in God, to rattle our trust, to begin questioning if going God's way is worth the risk of going hungry, of going without?

¹ Fretheim, Interpretation: Exodus, pg. 183.

I don't know about you, but I have days where all it takes is for my laptop to crash, for my toast to burn, for a tire to go flat, and I start thinking – God where are you? Why are you doing this to me? God, I don't know if I can trust you with today. Obviously, you're not up to the task of looking out for me.

What I find really miraculous in this passage is not the arrival of the quail, not the rain of manna from heaven. What I find truly remarkable in the face of the grumbling and rumbling Israelites is the fact that above all else, God is gracious, God is patient, and God is forgiving.

Try to imagine how frustrating this whole scene must have been for God. To hear the Israelites start to grumble and doubt at the first uncomfortable pangs of hunger, to see them look wistfully back at their former life as slaves, just because God did not make deliverance as easy as they'd like it to be. If I were God, I would have let the Hebrews starve.

I know what I would have said to Moses, “How dare they! What nerve! You watch me send plagues, you walk between the waters, you see me bring you out of slavery with power and with glory, and you now can't trust I'm going to feed you! Fine! Go back to Egypt. Have a nice swim.”

Well thank goodness there is a God, and that I am not him.

Instead, as we read today, God provides for his children, whiny and forgetful as they are. God gives them what they need. God continues to lead and to shepherd, to guide and provide for them. For the next forty years, God feeds his people from his hand. God sustains and nourishes them with the bread of heaven, new every morning, an ongoing gift of God's care.

And God does one thing more. Because God wants more than anything else for his people to trust and follow him, to rely upon him, to be shaped and led by him, God sets conditions on the food he provides. God sets conditions on how his people will live, on the schedule they must keep, on the plans that they can make. Considering all that God has done for them, it's

not a lot to ask.

Of course some of the Israelites still try to manage their manna their own way. They gather more than God commands them to. They try to hold on to it longer than God would have them keep it. They neglect to plan for the sabbath, and suffer hunger for it.

Watching this, the Lord says to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions!” It won't be the last time.

So begins a long cycle of God commanding, and the people doing their own thing. A repeating pattern of God providing, and of God's people soon forgetting the One from whom all their blessings flow. The people grumble, and God answers with kindness and grace.

It's a cycle we're still stuck in today. For all that God has done for us, for all that God does for us each and every day, we are so quickly shaken, so quick to seek our own way out, our own way back, whenever trouble finds us.

Thank God that grace still abounds. Thank God that in Jesus Christ, the love and care shown to the Hebrews in the desert is present for us today. Thank God that the mercy showered on his people in the desert is the same mercy that rests on us today.

Ephesians 2:4-9

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.

6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Thank God it's not all up to us. That our hope of reaching the promised land rests not on our

shoulders, not on our effort or our own wavering resolve, but on the strength and faithfulness of our gracious Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the bread from heaven, who came for us, that we might be fed.

Amen.

Many centuries later, after disobedience and mistrust led God's people to defeat and exile in a foreign land, God lead his people Israel out of slavery again, back to the promised land. Then the priest Ezra reminds God's people of God's

Neh. 9: 5 In their hunger you gave them **bread** from **heaven** and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession **of** the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

16 "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. 17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,

18 even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.

19 "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take.

20 You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst.

God cares about what his people need. God knows that we are body as well as spirit, that we are matter as well as mind. Jesus may have said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4) But it's just as true that you can't live without bread.

From it's very beginning, the Bible provides examples of how the physical and the spiritual, how stomach and soul, are inseparably bound together.

In the Old Testament story of Elijah, found in the book of I Kings, God helps the exhausted prophet by sending an angel with bread and water. God's angel encourages Elijah to eat his fill, not once, but twice, and after eating it says, Elijah got up and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. (I Kings 19:6)

In the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught to his disciples, he said to ask that God's will be done, and then to ask for our daily bread. In Jesus' prayer we ask both for food for the spirit,

and food for the body. (Matt. 6:9)

Food ranks high among our basic needs, and knowing that food is available brings us great comfort – no longer how long or how painful the preacher’s sermon, you know a cup of coffee and a cookie, or even better today, one of this church’s famous covered dish luncheons, waits for you just beyond the benediction. And there may be Sundays where that’s the most encouraging thought to cross your mind. I hope that this is not one of them.

On many Sunday’s our Assurance of Pardon, which follows our prayer of confession, “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old life has gone, a new life has begun.” (II Cor. 5:17) But even though we’ve seen God’s grace, our new life in Christ may turn out a great deal scarier than life was before.

Remember, God calls us to follow him trustfully, relying on him to provide what we need, when we need it, and some days will require more trust than others.

If the Bible holds any encouragement, and it does, we know God was faithful in providing for the Israelites. God earned their trust and their praise as he worked out their miraculous escape with clouds and fire, with water, wind and mud. But now they wanted some food, and the rumbling in their bellies began to drown out the praises on their lips.

to his people, to see if they will follow, even with a full belly. If you read a little further on into Exod., you see how particular this manna was – you were to gather just what you needed for that day – anything you tried to stockpile would be rotten and stinking by the next morning. That was true everyday except for the sixth day of the week, the day of preparation for the Sabbath, when God did instruct the people to gather twice as much. On the Sabbath day, no manna came, but what was kept over stayed fresh.

Just as God operates on the large scale, with nations and plagues, God also pays attention to the little things, like what’s for lunch today. Knowing his people stand hungry in the desert,

God feeds them – but not just to fill their bellies. God provides, but with a purpose. Hearing his people’s murmuring, the Lord says to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not. (16:4) Even as God meets their physical need, God emphasizes that his deepest desire for Israel is for them to live in all times and circumstances as the people of God, a people shaped by their relationship with him, a people led and guided by God’s word and law.

While we live in need of things like food, water, shelter, we are foremost and primarily creatures of faith. As new creations in and through and with Jesus Christ, our relationship with God is our realest, deepest, truest identity and definition. In the end, we are not what we wear or where we live, we are not what we possess or own, not what sits in our refrigerators or in our garages. No, what really matters now and hereafter is that we are God’s children, we are the heirs of his kingdom, living each and every moment utterly dependent upon his grace and provenance.

And that should help us understand why God provided food for the Israelites in such a unique manner. Or should I say, Manna.

The bread God sent in response to Moses’ and Aaron’s and the people’s appeal was like nothing they had seen before. In studying this passage, I read what has come to be accepted as the natural explanation for God’s miraculous menu.

“Regarding the quail, migratory birds flying in from Africa or blown in from the Mediterranean are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.”² Simple enough. God stirs up a flock of birds, calls up some more wind, and presto – quail BBQ.

But the manna, that’s a more interesting story. If anyone here has studied biology you can testify to the truth of this – it seems there is “a type of plant lice in the Sinai Peninsula that will puncture the fruit of the tamarisk tree and produce a substance from its juice. The insect

² Fretheim, 182.

excretes this (I'm quoting here – not my words) in a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives of the region who bake it into a kind of bread (and call it manna.)”³

If any of you are reading the King James Version, you'll see in verse 15 the word “manna,” which comes from the Hebrew question, “man hu?” Translated literally “manna” means, “What is it?”

And for many of God's gifts, that's a perfect response. “God, what in the world am I supposed to do with this?” “Lord, what have you sent me, and why?” God will satisfy your hunger and meet your need, but not how you expect. I'm sure that after seeing all the amazing things God did to get them out of slavery in Egypt, some of the Israelites were expecting to pray for food and then see little herds of fillet mignon marching across the desert to meet them.

In all matters, God provides a way – his way.

So if you're in need, if you've followed God out into the desert and you're hungry – go to him and ask for what you want. You have that right. Take your needs to God, but go knowing that God may not be reading off the same menu as you are; be ready for a meal of his own making.

Ultimately, God provides for you, to meet your needs, because he even cares about all tiresome everyday stuff we have to have to survive. But more than that, God gives you what you have so that you might live with him and for him - as His man, His woman, His child. In him you are so much more than the sum of your needs or your possessions. Body and soul, mind and heart, you belong to him, and he wants to care for all of you.

If you don't believe me, let me close with words from a greater authority. In his sermon on the mount found in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus encourages his disciples with these words,
5 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or

³ Fretheim, 182.

about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the [pagans] who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Today's trouble is certainly enough for today. Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ that he'll give us what we need to make it. Today, and tomorrow, and forever. Amen.