

Sermon: October 1, 2017 – Exodus 16, Worldwide Communion Sunday
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

At Presbytery this week, our hosts, Rev's Susan Lukey and David Robertson from High River United Church led us in worship. This fall, they have been taking a look at the concept of time, and how our understanding of time impacts the way that we embrace God's great gift of life.

They spoke of the way that time seems to move at different rates at different points of our lives. A British Psychologist named Dr. Steve Taylor describes it well: he recently retraced a trip that he used to take as a child and discovered that the two-hour car ride he experienced as a six year old still takes basically two hours, but as an adult the time just flew by, compared to how endless it seemed when he was a boy. There are many theories as to why this happens, ranging from physiological to philosophical, but Taylor describes it this way:

“Young children appear to live in a completely different world to adults - a much more intense, more real and more fascinating and beautiful one. This is one of the reasons why we often recall childhood as a time of bliss - because the world was a much more exciting and beautiful place to us then, and all our experiences were so intense. Children...constantly take in all kinds of details which pass us adults by - tiny cracks in windows, tiny insects crawling across the floor, patterns of sunlight on the carpet etc. And even the larger scale things which we can see as well seem to be more real to them, to be brighter, with more presence and is-ness. All of this information stretches out time for children.

“However, as we get older, we lose this intensity of perception, and the world becomes...so dreary and familiar that we stop paying attention to it...and time speeds up. As we become adults, we begin to 'switch off' to the wonder and is-ness of the world, gradually stop paying conscious attention to our surroundings and experience. As a result we take in less information, which means that time passes more quickly. Time [for us] is less 'stretched' with information.”

That explanation makes perfect sense— and makes me a bit sad. I do think that this phenomenon is less pronounced out here in the mountains, where the things we see every day are so strikingly beautiful that we are not so prone to take them for granted but still, the idea that the world of wonder and length of days I experienced as a boy has now been replaced by a world of sameness and shortness of days, truly gives me pause.

As I look for a remedy for this particular malaise, the good news is that I need look no further than today's reading from the book of Exodus.

In this week's episode of “Exodus, the Sermon Series” we experience the children of Israel doing pretty much exactly the same thing we heard about last week. In both Exodus 16, manna from heaven, and Exodus 17, water from the rock, we see four basic elements: the people fear that they are going to perish because there is nothing to eat/drink in this barren land, they wonder why they ever left the comforts of Egypt, they complain to Moses about it, and God overcomes their lack of trust by solving the problem.

In today's reading, the people had a wonderfully melodramatic way of stating their problems, saying (Ex. 16:3) “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.” Unlike their cries of being thirsty, which is confronted by Moses who then needs to go negotiate a solution with God, the expression of hunger in Exodus 16 was answered immediately - but listen to the wording: “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.**’”(Ex 16: 4)

Here we have the initial answer to our wonderings about time: **one non-negotiable and unchanging thing about life, is that God gives it to us one day at a time.**

In addition to Dr. Taylor's very sensible explanation, it is my belief that part of the reason that children experience their days as "fuller" than adults do, is that we adults waste so much time dwelling on the past or anticipating the future. Unlike children, particularly small children, who live almost entirely in the present, we adults barely give the present a chance to breathe.

World Religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and the mystical strands of Christianity, urge us to have greater mindfulness: to "go deep" and savour the glory of the moment; to allow distractions to float past; to release regrets or indignation about the past, to stop worrying about or over-planning the future. Shirley Erena Murray's lovely contemplative hymn, "come and find the quiet centre" puts it well: "clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see all the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be."

The gift of manna, a gift renewed each day that is sufficient for that day only, calls us to view life in this mindful, in-the-moment way. I love how cleverly the story is constructed. Each person – each child, woman and man - is entitled to collect enough for the day but no more. There is such an ample supply each day that if they wanted to hoard it, they could, at least in theory. If they wanted to develop a society where the good gatherers got wealthy and the slow gatherers were indebted to them, they could go ahead and try but here's the thing about manna: just like the gift of life, given one day at a time, manna has a hard expiry date. After 24 hours, manna goes "off" so hoarding it gives you a smelly, maggoty mess. Yuck! One day at a time, when it came to manna, was not just a good idea, it was a requirement.

There is **one more thing** to be said about this new economy of time. Well-aware of the human tendency to reduce the gift of life to nothing but work, work, work, **God has designed this gift of manna to enforce a new boundary: taking a breather every seventh day.**

Although the concept of sabbath first appears way back in the story of creation (Gen.2), with all work completed in six days followed by a seventh day of rest, today's reading is where it really takes shape. While manna is to be collected one day at a time, no manna will be provided on the Sabbath day, so the day before that you can collect double, without it going all rank and wriggly on you.

Isn't that just the coolest thing? One day a week, the Sabbath day, there's not going to be any manna, but not to worry, because you can safely collect double the amount the day before – so you can devote that seventh day to resting, and reflecting, and rejoicing. While we play fast and loose with how Sabbath works in our world of 24/7 commerce, God made it clear to us, early in the game, that we work every waking hour at our own peril. That is good news, and news to be heeded, not only by those of us prone to over-work, but to everyone who is concerned about all those people who have little choice but to work day and night. God's desire that humans have time to actually enjoy the gifts of home and family, extends to a sweat-shop worker in Bangladesh and a single mom working split shifts at a restaurant in the Bow Valley and a child labourer mining cobalt in the Congo, as well as the middle-class workaholic who simply cannot turn away from enslaving him or herself to the earning potential of every moment. We are called not only to have healthy work hygiene in our lives, but to press for a world where nobody is a "wage slave."

Throughout the ancient narratives of Exodus, I acknowledge that there are many points where the modern listener has to suspend a great deal of disbelief: a bush that burns without being consumed? a terrifying spirit that spares only the faithful? walls of water creating a path through the sea for the Israelites? manna raining down from heaven? Admittedly, it can all stretch the limits of credulity, and that's fine, because that's not where their truth resides. I love these

stories, because they consistently tell us of a God who wants us to be freed from enslavement, even when we want to put the shackles back on. It reminds us that the same God remained committed to freeing the captives, in the words and deeds of Jesus, and in peace-loving followers of all religions. Every miraculous story in Exodus speaks of God's deep commitment to freedom: that all God's children be freed from physical enslavement, freed from hunger and thirst, freed from the desire to take more than our fair share, freed from working ourselves to death. Oppressed people have for millennia turned to the words of Exodus to find hope for a future day of freedom, whether their oppression is based in dead-end jobs, or entrenched racism, or misogyny, or the sneaky but pervasive power of addictions. Throughout the book of Exodus, and at the heart of this story of manna every morning, is God's desire to save us from anything that would diminish the gift of life, even if the thing that God needs to save us from, is ourselves – the ease with which we give ourselves over to working 24/7, the ways we think that God won't notice if we take more than our fair share.

Although it was only given in those travelling days, with the Israelites needing to cultivate their own food once they were settled, this transitional gift of manna teaches us so much about the daily gift of life. And so we stand back and marvel at this unusual, holy gift: manna in the morning, the bread of heaven that gives sustenance for hungry bodies and hungry souls, which comes complete with a built-in seventh-day safety valve to keep us from ruining the gift. We give thanks for the truth that still rings out from this story, and for the God whose gift of liberation and life who comes to us in fullness, one day at a time. Amen, and Amen.

References cited:

Murray, Shirley Erena. "Come and find the quiet centre", Hope Publishing Company, 1992. Found at #374 in *Voices United*.

Taylor, Steve. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201107/why-does-time-seem-pass-different-speeds>

And... the book being studied this fall by High River United Church:

Chapman, Terry. *Sabbath Pause*. Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 2012.

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