

**Sermon: October 1, 2023 – Exodus 16: 2-15**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley**

In the scripture reading just shared with us, we heard about the complaints of the Hebrew people as the exodus dragged on and God's wondrous response. Over the years, I've heard a sermon or two that have made light of these complaints, using the analogy of kids whining "are we there yet" in the back seat of the minivan, ten minutes after leaving home. To be honest, I may even have written a sermon or two along those lines.

This morning, I'm not drawn to minimize in any way the experience of the Hebrew people as they left a difficult but familiar situation, only to find that the thing that came next had its own set of challenges. I'd have a hard time judging their responses, for I can identify with them. My experiences - and the way many of you describe your experiences - and our shared experiences - and the context of the world we live in - can feel an awful lot like leaving, and very little like arriving. And when that is the case, we may well find ourselves yearning for the easy days of yore which have grown even more perfect in our memories amidst present uncertainty.

So: let's wander into this experience of the Hebrew people and seek what it may bring to us. According to the Biblical account the people were at the beginning of a forty year journey, the number forty signalling that this was a long time, in which God's activity was particularly recognizable. In that two thousand week journey, the Israelites were at about week seven, yet Egypt was already starting to look like a place they should never have left. No, they didn't have much personal agency there and yes, they had literally been beasts of burden, but they had food and drink and a place to sleep at night. They raised their complaints to Moses and Aaron or, more accurately, to God, the initiator of this supposed rescue mission. And here is the answer that came, in the words of Eugene Peterson's The Message translation:

"GOD said to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread down from the skies for you. The people will go out and gather each day's ration. I'm going to test them to see if they'll live according to my Teaching or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they have gathered, it will turn out to be twice as much as their daily ration."<sup>6-7</sup> Moses and Aaron told the People of Israel, "This evening you will know that it is GOD who brought you out of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the Glory of GOD".

This wasn't a time for God to push back against the people, for hunger is a real thing to be met with tangible solutions. Not only were people hungry; they were in unfamiliar surroundings, their food supplies had run out and there was no predictable food source in view, and desperation was setting in. In response to the people's hunger, God gave food: evening quail ready for the catching, and morning manna to be gathered. There was provision, and there were also a couple of provisos.

Described as sweet and bready and delicious, resembling coriander seed and tasting of honey or almond, the Hebrew word manna is best translated, “what is it?” because they had never seen anything like it, nor had they experienced something provided so faithfully each and every morning. But there were two things they needed to understand about it: there would be no manna on the Sabbath, so they needed to collect double the day ahead; and there was no hoarding: the lovely, fresh manna of the morning would go wormy if you tried to store it up for future consumption. God promised one batch of manna every 24 hours, with a double dose to get them through Sabbath, and they needed to trust the shape and the giver of that promise.

On the whole – *on the whole* – this is a story of good news, and God’s trustworthiness. Through everything else we do or say this morning, I want to lift that up high. Life itself is a gift of God, the things that nature provides for our sustenance are gifts of God, deliverance from harm is a gift of God, community is a gift of God, and the necessity of sacred rest – at least every seventh day – is a gift of God. And as weird and unsettling as we may find these days we live in, this basic relationship between people who are willing to trust, and a loving God who is oriented to give, remains intact.

In the constraints of a Sunday sermon, I’d like us to engage God’s faithful provision for human need in two different ways. First, I lift up our need, as Church, to recognize God’s daily gifts. I have not spoken with one leader of a Church or non-profit who talks about the three years since 2020 as easy. We’re all struggling with diminished volunteerism, diminished givings, impacts of aging on the volunteer base of most organizations, and a spiritual funk that just won’t let go. If there was a way of going back to 2019 or earlier, few of us wouldn’t flip that switch right now.

In the gift of manna, God insisted that the Hebrew people stop fantasizing about days gone by, to accept that they had been freed from all that. Manna, given in daily batches, also taught them how to live with the grace of this moment rather than the fear of future shortages. We learn from the past, in the way that the Hebrew people were repeatedly reminded about God’s role in delivering them from their oppression, and we do move toward the horizon, in the way that the promised land was out in front of Moses and Aaron and the people...but the way we live that out is in the here and now. We don’t exit from preparing for a faithful future, and as Orange Shirt Day reminds us, we are fully accountable to the past, but each day needs to have a rhythm of spiritual replenishment, and living, and rest. That is the gift of manna: you will have what you need today, so live. Live a day to its fullest: each day be aware of the needs of your body; live in healthy relationship with your loved ones and your neighbours and the planet. Be a person and yes, *be a Church* that embodies and conveys the very love of God, each day. And let yourself be shaped by the wisdom of friends in twelve-step programs who embrace this prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept

the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time.”

The first point, then, is to live God’s faithful gift of days, one day at a time. The second point for us in the story of manna is the reality of hunger and God’s calling to us to engage with that reality.

At the start of this sermon I intentionally stepped back from making sport of the people’s complaining in the very early days of the Exodus, for hunger is no laughing matter. On this World Communion Sunday we celebrate our global connectedness in Christ and we are called to look at the global context of hunger. Journalists Hanna Duggal and Marium Ali write:

“Hunger levels are rising around the world. [Over 820 million] people – or 10 percent of the world’s population – go to bed hungry each night, 46 million more than the previous year, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Of those affected by hunger, two-thirds are women and 80 percent live in areas prone to climate change.

“Hunger is a debilitating state that occurs when the body is deprived of food for an extended period. Prolonged periods of hunger can lead to health problems and can cause lifelong physical and cognitive damage, particularly among children. Undernutrition extends beyond calorie intake to indicate deficiencies in energy and protein, as well as vital vitamins and minerals.

“Following a decade of consistent decrease, global hunger has witnessed an upward trend in recent years. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of undernourished individuals increased by more than 150 million, primarily fuelled by conflicts, climate change, economic shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic”.

At our luncheon today, we’ll hear more about this and will experience what it is when simple, staple foods are all that’s available and there may or may not be enough to go around, but at this moment let me say this: it is not, and never has been the will of God for children and their parents to go to bed hungry. Yes, some people will live with greater ease than others, but the Bible has always called people of faith to share. Landowners were to leave the edges of their fields for gleaners to come in and harvest (Leviticus 19:9-10), and both the prophets of old and Jesus call the people to give special attention to those most likely to face hardship: widows and orphans and displaced people (Deuteronomy 24:19, among many). In our personal practices, we are called to support food producers with the most sustainable practices, to eat the food we prepare and compost unusable trimmings and scraps, to work with local initiatives like the Canmore Food Recovery, Banff Food Rescue, and Food and Friends in both communities, and with

charitable organizations like Canadian Foodgrains Bank who are doing on-the-ground work to address the root causes and in-the-moment realities of world hunger. In our lives as people of faith, we are called as one to go beyond this, to become knowledgeable advocates not just for the alleviation of hunger, but the eradication of the factors of global inequality that make it so prevalent.

In the story of manna, God reached into real, urgent, human need. As those who understand God's love for the world we are to believe and embrace that reach-out and to extend provision and kindness and justice, wherever there is need. And whether it is bellies that need feeding, or hearts that are yearning, we open ourselves to the holy, seeking refreshment sufficient to the day. Thanks be to God for the ongoing promise of manna, the bread of heaven. Amen.

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World Vision. <https://www.worldvision.org/hunger-news-stories/world-hunger-facts>

Zavada, Jack. <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-manna-700742>

**PLUS local links for Food Security:** <https://bvfa.ca/food-supports>

GOOD FOOD BOX - <https://bowvalleypcn.ca/good-food-box/>

FOOD RESCUE/RECOVERY - <https://www.banffcollective.com/food-rescue> and <https://canmorefoodrecoverybarn.weebly.com/>

FOOD BANKS - <https://www.bowvalleyfoodbank.ca/> and [banff.food.bank@gmail.com](mailto:banff.food.bank@gmail.com)

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