

22 On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, 23he said to them, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning." ' 24So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. 25Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. 26For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.'

27 On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. 28The Lord said to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? 29See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.' 30So the people rested on the seventh day.

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." ' 33And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations.' 34As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant,* for safe-keeping. 35The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. 36An omer is a tenth of an ephah.

The Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness, following a pillar of cloud and fire through desert land, with little water and food. This particular journey of the Israelites was difficult, the biblical wilderness is not Rocky Mountain refreshment, it is desert, uncomfortable, unsheltered, and infertile. Times were miserable, so they complained, says the text. Actually, complain isn't the right word here, the Hebrew word and the context say it was something more than complaint. The Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, we would rather God had killed us in Egypt, they said, you guys Moses and Aaron have just let us out here to die of starvation. They did complain, sure, so would anybody going hungry in the wilderness, but there was more to their negativity, they had become infected by it, and turned complaint to despair. The congregation despaired, they did not recognize the presence of the Lord (Moses and Aaron had led them out), they did not trust in God's providence, and they did not hope for their future. The Israelites, so recently saved from slavery and delivered through the sea, are quick to turn and doubt that the God who had performed such wondrous and awe-inspiring deeds of power would be unable to provide for their most basic needs.

Complaining wasn't the issue here, complaining is a reasonable human response to struggle. Despairing was the issue, and there are problems with despairing. To despair is not to acknowledge difficulty or pain or suffering. That is real and part of the human experience. But despairing is to have an habitual mind-set that assumes the absolute worst, that when something happens, the mind immediately goes to the negative consequences and focuses on the expected negative outcome. Despairing does several things. Despairing catches us up in a mood, in a spirit, in an attitude which tends to cause us to focus on unbelief instead of on belief, to see what is negative instead of seeing the possibilities for good that exist in the present. The complaining wasn't the people's problem, as much as pastors would probably love to preach about a complaining congregation. It makes me think of the story about a pastor who decided to change the entire worship service one Sunday, every element was different, and one of the senior women in the congregation shook his hand after worship, looked him right in the eyes and said, "Don't ever do that again." This is not a story that has much to say about that. This is a story and a journey about something entirely different, that is the risks of despair, of trustlessness and hopelessness, that can happen all too easily out in the wilderness of life.

A seminary colleague of mine got to know a man named Keith, and tells his story. Keith got mixed up as a teenager, and went to jail for 22 years for a serious crime. Something happened, it would seem, to Keith while he was in prison, he got the chance to grow up for one. When he was released, Keith had nothing, and

no one would hire him because of his record, and he had no preparation for what life would be like on the outside. Keith was, quite literally, wandering, in the wilderness that we know as homelessness, and he did so for 9 years, having gone as he describes “from lock-down to lay-down.” This wandering would be different than his childhood, however, Keith stayed out of trouble, and became a regular volunteer for a homeless outreach center called Emmaus House.

In the midst of all of his personal struggles, and I’m sure there were complaints, he would repeat a new personal refrain, “I feel so blessed.” In the park when the churches give out food, Keith waits around to see if anyone who comes in late needs something to eat. Franklin, then, shares or gives away the only food he has, the food he has just been given, with the late comer. One day he said, “God didn’t have no house. God didn’t have no car. He was like me. He came and died for us, so that we could live.”¹ Something happened to Keith while he was in prison, it would seem, he grew up for sure, but he also apparently heard a story, God’s story, and heard it very well.

The people of Israel had not heard the story very well, it would seem, and despaired. They were reminded by Moses and Aaron, though, that God hears them, God hears their complaints, God hears their despair. Then the people, in their despairing in the wilderness, encountered God’s presence and providence. As if out of nowhere, quails appeared, and then a bread-like substance appeared out of the morning dew, called manna. God provided, but just enough, just enough for today. No hoarding God’s providence. It was small and sufficient, and just as the bitter water had been made sweet, altogether miraculous. This is, isn’t it, so often the way God provides in the wilderness of life, just enough to get by, not enough to carry you through tomorrow, but over time you get through.

There was only one reason to stash up on manna, and that was to honor the Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping is something the church doesn’t talk about enough, in part because the church doesn’t practice it, we work hardest on the Sabbath generally. But God intended rest, no God commanded rest, and got ticked off when the Israelites did not honor this command.

Kind of a strange theme to enter in this journey through the wilderness, the Sabbath. They were wandering, desperate, but at that time God felt the need to test their obedience of the Sabbath day of rest. In our story for today, the Sabbath commandment gets linked, it would seem, with the holy practice of remembering. Moses and Aaron were told to collect a special stash of manna to keep by the altar, so that the people would remember how God provided for them. They needed something to remember this by. Because when you’re in the wilderness, whether it’s family trouble, or job trouble, or identity crisis, or trouble putting food on the table, it is easy to complain, sure, but it is also easy to become despairing. So as they rested on the Sabbath, and worshipped, the people would stop working and being busy despairing so that they could rest, kneel before God, and remember. Remember the Lord your God.

So for us, this summer, Sabbath is a timely mention. Take a breath. Worship. Pray. Remember. Even if, and especially if, you find yourself in the wilderness.

The message of today’s story and journey is this. Complain, but do not despair. God provides just enough in strange and mysterious ways. And as you rest and reflect, remember that hope and trust in God are always justified.

¹ Peggy Jean Craig, student at Candler School of Theology, “ConEd as Transformational Experience,” June 2010.

Exodus 16:2-15 - link to the NRSV text

Last week I spoke about the pattern that is repeated several times in the wilderness narratives of crisis-grumbling-providence-deliverance, and this pattern shapes the narrative for this Sunday. The Israelites, so recently saved from slavery and delivered through the sea, are quick to turn and doubt that the God who had performed such wondrous and awe-inspiring deeds of power would be unable to provide for their most basic needs.

And so the people grumbled “against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness” (Exo 16:2). “If only God had killed us back in Egypt!” they despair. “Why, back in Egypt we had plenty of food! You’ve only brought us out here to die from hunger.”

The present often seems worse than the past. We often romanticize the “days of yore” and think of them as better than now. We especially see this in the American church; while dealing with declining membership and people’s suspicions of apathy towards the Christian faith, we think back to when everyone just went to church because it was “what you did.” And we assume that this was better. Maybe it was better, maybe not.

Or we think back and look at society and culture and think things were so much better than. People were more polite, you didn’t have to lock your doors, everything was closed on Sunday, no school would ever schedule activities on Wednesday nights, etc.

I could go on and on about the things we think were “better” back in the previous times. But I think the main reason we romanticize the past is that we know that we can get through the past whereas the present and future is still undecided. Kind of a “better the enemy you know” way of thinking; sure, it wasn’t perfect but at least we know we could get through it.

The God of Israel, however, is not a God of the past. This God is a God of the present and future, one who calls us to new places and new ways of being in relationship with God and with each other. Jesus himself hinted at this idea when he taught, “[H]ave you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:31-32; cf. Mark 12:26-27, Luke 20:37-38).

Here in his teaching on resurrection, I believe Jesus is pointing to a fundamental characteristic of this God: that this God is one that seeks life and renewal over death and stagnation. It might seem self-evident, but I know in the church we often do live this teaching out very well, clinging stubbornly to our pasts to the detriment of our future.

And in this story of bread from heaven, we are reminded that while the future may be uncertain God does not send us to a place where we will not be provided for. As God tells 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” (Exo 16:4). God will provide us what we need to go on, to live and to survive in our wilderness places. It is a promise that God will be with us daily, providing us what we need to get by, whether this “bread from heaven” is physical or spiritual food.

And lastly, how God provides may be in ways that we don’t recognize at first and we’re unsure what God is at work doing. The Israelites, when they went out to gather, they found what the text describes as “a fine flaky

substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (16:14). And the Israelites look at it, then each other and ask, "Okay. So what is it?" And Moses answers, "It is the bread God has provided you to eat."

Where are those gifts and blessings God has sent that we don't immediately recognize? What are some of the things we have that we haven't realized is God's doing in order that we might be people of life and love and not people dragged down by what always was? Where is God raining "bread from heaven" in your life and in the life of your church or family or community in order that it might find its way forward in the wilderness, away from the past of bondage and into a new day of life with God?

As Jesus taught his disciples to pray, so we too pray this day: "Give us today our daily bread," whatever form that bread might take in order that we can be the liberated people of God.

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

bullet This pericope is part of the "murmuring tradition" in Exodus, in which people who had experienced the Exodus complained that the good old days of slavery in Egypt were better.

bullet Note that the complaint is against Moses and Aaron, the two leaders of the community. The glory of Yahweh is a characteristic expression of the divine theophany in the priestly narrative. God promises to send both meat (quail) and bread (manna).

bullet The question "what is it" (manna) is answered by Moses: "This is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat."

bullet This bread of heaven has an echo in our eucharistic bread. The gospel for the day continues the reading from John 6, the feeding of the 5,000.

Genesis 1-11 has established that Yahweh is the creator, orderer, and sustainer of the universe, at the center of which are humans who continue to break fellowship with Yahweh. Genesis 12 marks the restoration of broken fellowship with Yahweh by covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, and establishment of the unity of humankind through Abraham. Covenant came to Abraham with sacrifice and deprivation, leaving country and people behind, and in his dislocation the fulfillment of Yahweh would be made known.

Now remember the context for our story – a pattern of humans mucking things up that need to be repaired by God. And then God does what any frustrated, angry God would do, I will bless you. I will, despite your humanity and limitations, kneel before you and declare you sacred and holy, and imbue you with the power to produce well-being in every area of life.

Dr. Joyce Wilkins tells a story about her mother, who was for all of her life a teacher of brain-damaged children, and she taught me when you look at people you don't look at the damage. You look at the image. You don't look at the damage; you look at the image of God in them. I knew that most forcefully," she said, "one night when my mother had for parent's night her class do a performance of My Fair Lady. It never occurred to my mother not to let a brain-damaged girl in a wheelchair roll across the stage singing, 'I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night.'"

Abram did not know where the land of promise was until God appeared to him, and revealed it to him. Then Abram built an altar at the place.

What altars will we build? An altar is a place for offering to God, sacrifice or burnt offering.

Then he journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

I was in a small group a few years ago which was being led by Fred Craddock, the pre-eminent preacher and teacher of preaching, who told us about a conversation he once had with a friend of his, a rabbi. They had been talking about various intricacies of the Hebrew language, when Craddock asked his friend the rabbi what was his favorite Hebrew word for God. Perhaps he was expecting, as I would have, a word like “Yahweh” or “Elohim.” Or maybe some descriptive phrase like “mighty warrior” or “jealous one.” Craddock says the man thought for a minute, and then said simply: “My favorite word for God is a word that the Hebrews developed back during the Exile, back when they were a wandering people, a people on the move. The word means literally, “The Place.” The Place! His favorite word for God—the Place! A great word for God for people who see the faith as a pilgrimage.

In the face of that ongoing temptation to dig in and make our home prematurely in some altogether too comfortable, familiar place, the gospel calls us to remember that God—just God—is the Place where we belong. Which might re-orient for you the way you feel about this place. This place—spectacular as it is, this jewel here in the center of the city—is not finally a destination so much as it is a milepost. This great church, full of beauty and inspiration and delight and servanthood and compassion, is where you come to remember not so much that you have arrived, but that you are still on a journey. Here there is a tradition that can guide you toward God—the Place where we belong. And the challenge for you is to strain to keep your eyes on that place, even as you do your work in this place. Strain to be fed and nourished by that place, even as you gather regularly to be fed from this place. Until even here, in the heart of this hometown, you will remember who you are—not settlers but pilgrims, people on the move, people who find meaning more in the journey than in the destination, people who are energized not by what we already possess but by that which possesses us: a word of good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the power of what can happen in God’s good time, and even in this place.

Newell writes: "God is to be found not by stepping aside from the flow of daily life into religious moments and environments, or by looking away from creation to a spiritual realm beyond, but rather by entering attentively the depths of the present moment. There we will find God, wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing" (*The Book of Creation*).

[Lakota Sioux Prayer](#)

Oh, Great Spirit
Whose voice I hear in the winds,
And whose breath gives life to all the world,
hear me, I am small and weak,
I need your strength and wisdom.

It's not the busyness by itself that's the problem, but the timing of it. Paul Tillich once put it this way. "There are innumerable concerns in our lives and in human life generally," he says, "which demand attention, devotion, passion. But they do not demand infinite attention, unconditional devotion, ultimate passion. They are important, often very important, for you and me and for the whole of humankind. But they are not ultimately important...."