

“Bread from Heaven”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 20, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 105:1-2, 37-42

Exodus 16:2-15

We had hoped to spend this morning in our Outdoor Chapel but the threat of rain – and the reality that we are vulnerable to natural conditions beyond our control – mean that we find ourselves neither in the sanctuary, our normal worship space, nor in our planned outdoor space, but, instead, here in the Fellowship Hall. Sometimes, we are reminded how much of our lives take place in these liminal spaces: not where we have been and are used to being, and also not yet at our intended destination, but somewhere, uncomfortably, in-between.

Today’s story from Exodus is one of liminal space; the people of Israel find themselves in a wilderness beyond that land of Egypt, where God had heard their cries for freedom, but before they reach Sinai, where God will be fully revealed to them. The wilderness is a place, in biblical rhetoric, where no viable life support systems exist. The Exodus people, now free but hungry, remember fondly what it was like to be well-fed in Egypt, even if they were enslaved. They begin to reminisce for the days “when we would sit by the fleshpots and eat our fill of bread.” Later in the wilderness journey, the people will complain again, saying, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Numbers 11:4-6)

It would have been better to die in Egypt, they believe, than to have been brought out into this wilderness just to starve. The compounding forces of time, environment, and uncertainty have snuffed out the afterglow of liberation. In the process, history and memory are rewritten. Forgotten are the years of domination, terror, and enslavement under Pharaoh. All the Israelite community can now remember about Egypt is that they had full bellies at the end of the day. Nostalgic longing for a misremembered history is a powerful and dangerous force, especially in an environment of scarcity and adversity.

But God continues to be responsive to human suffering by addressing physical needs. Just as God heard the cries of Israel in bondage and brought them out of it, just as God parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow them safe passage, God now hears the people’s cries of hunger and provides food for them. Through the Exodus and in this feeding in the wilderness, God acts “so that you shall know that it was the LORD

who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Knowledge of God is not just an intellectual experience; it is a physical one.¹

In response to their complaints, God rains manna down from heaven. The people’s reaction to this flaky white substance that covered the ground in the morning like dew is: “man-hu?” which means “what is it?” For the complaint about meat, God provides quails in the evening. These daily provisions of bread and meat are to be unambiguous signs that leaves no doubt: God is their daily provider – new mercies will arrive each day. God is replacing their distorted memories of luxurious food in the exploitative economy of Egyptian enslavement with a new reality of sufficient, equitable food in the wilderness.

And just as God brought forth food from the earth, it now rained down upon them. This “bread of heaven” was nothing like they knew, which makes it a *wonder bread* that fit none of their previous experience or understandings: they wondered what it could be.² The people are to gather in the morning what they need for the day and no more, except on the day before the Sabbath when they gather enough for both days. Order is established in the midst of chaos by means of this rhythm of divine provision.

The text declares that God’s particular manner of feeding the Israelites represents a test to see “whether they will follow my instruction or not.” Through this story and beyond, the people learn that they have everything they need, and never more than they need. They learn that the provisions from God are enough, and that striving for more than enough is a fool’s errand.

Here in the wilderness, when the people of Israel are so anxious about food that they would rather go back to slavery in Egypt, God sees and hears and acts. God’s test is diagnostic: checking the level of trust within the Israelites; teaching them that God will provide for their daily needs. When they finally reach the Promised Land, this will be a harder lesson to follow because – with milk and honey, and vineyards and other complex food production systems at their disposal – the Israelites will be tempted to believe they deserve the credit for providing for themselves. They will be tempted to worship other gods and fail to remember who it was that delivered them from slavery. They will be tempted to go back to the ways of Egypt where the weak are subjugated under the control of the powerful and food is used as a weapon and source of constant worry.

In the wilderness, God is teaching the people a different economy. God wants them to learn that they do not need to compete with one another for food; that they do not need to be anxious and work around the clock, seven days a week without rest, in order to survive. Instead, they can trust that, in God’s economy, there is enough to meet

¹ Cameron Howard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*

everyone's daily needs; and that they can practice sharing freely because God always provides.

It is all-too-easy to criticize the people of Israel for their complaining and lack of trust. Yet, before we do that, we would do well to instead look at ourselves. Do we trust God to provide for our daily needs, even in liminal spaces or when we cannot recognize the form of God's provision? Do we fairly direct our complaints against leaders: whether they be progressive or conservative; presidents and senators or town council and school board members? And do we long to go back to earlier times, when things seemed simpler or more certain; even if the days and systems for which we reminisce were fundamentally unequal and exploitative?

In God's economy, revealed to the Israelites in the wilderness, there is no concept of over or under-consumption. In contrast to the systems of Egypt, where people were pitted against each other and the demands on workers were increasingly unrealistic, God imagines a world where daily provisions arrive with seemingly miraculous equity and justice. The fearful anxiety which leads to stock-piling resources need no longer exist; for even on the Sabbath day of rest – when work is not required – there will be enough for everyone.

As Christians, we look for ways to enact the reality of God's economy within a world that fails to trust that there will be enough. We do this by understanding what we really need and then sharing a portion of what we have been given with those who do not – whether because of ability or opportunity or circumstance – have what they need. We place our trust in God so that we need not live in constant, fearful anxiety.

This means that we are willing to donate to the food bank even when we can't be sure who the recipients of our generosity will be. It means we offer free community meals even to people who could probably afford to purchase their own food; or brand-named discount clothing at Pass-It-On to those who could afford to pay full price. It means that we offer financial support for the Dougbe River School in Liberia even if we will never meet any of the students who benefit from it. It means that we obey that command to honor the Sabbath even if there are still things to get done. It means that we look for ways to refrain from needlessly wasting energy resources because it will help heal the planet.

So many of our systems are built on the principles of fear and anxiety: the needs are many, the resources are limited, and there never seems to be enough to go around. Thus, we take what we need and even more; securing there will be enough for now and to protect us for what might happen tomorrow. Nevertheless, we are called to trust that God will provide for our daily needs. In God's economy, even when we cannot see God, God is at work in and through us, offering daily reminders that we do not need to

be fearful and anxious about the future when people around us are in need now. God's gracious gifts – sometimes so unrecognizable that we ask, “what is it?” – are all around us.

God's test of Israel is not so much a matter of determining whether they properly follow the instruction manual. More to the point is whether they will truly trust, even in liminal spaces, that the heavenly bread will also be daily bread. “Like each of us,” writes Michael Chan, “the Israelites are on a lengthy journey of trying to unlearn habits that were cultivated under Pharaoh's whip and learn anew what it means to wander this world under the care of a loving God.”³

The long history of Israel is a contrast between Pharaoh's system of never-enough and God's offer of abundance and plenty. The story of the Exodus cries out for us to re-shape this world into a place where no-one starves, where no-one has too much, where everyone is given opportunities to rest, and where all hearts and minds are freed from want or worry to instead focus on the glory of God. Amen.

³ Michael Chan from *WorkingPreacher.com*