

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY II

Ordinary

Exodus 16:2-3, 11-21

A Sermon Preached by
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Scripture:

Exodus 16:2-3, 11-21¹

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "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."

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Rev. Debra Jarvis
Please pray with me

Holy One,
We pray that you will open our hearts and our minds
to Your words
and to Your words within our words;
in your Son's name. – Amen.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. 1989.

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The manna story: this is really great story and you can get about twenty sermons out of it. But do not let your hearts be troubled nor let them afraid; you're only to get one. *[Laughter]* So. I could see that look!

Okay, just to recap: the Israelites are complaining to Moses. Again. They are always complaining. We could've stayed in Egypt. We could've eaten lots of meat. We could've eaten lots of bread. Instead you lead us out here into the wilderness to starve. Now let me just point out to you that at this point they were not actually starving; they're just afraid that they are going to starve. They are such whiners! And, they would be easy to hate if they weren't so much like us. So Moses takes their complaint to God, and God says, "Yeah, yeah. I heard you. So here's what I'm going to do: For dinner, the entrée will be quail. For breakfast, I'll be serving bread and you do not get your choice of rye, wheat, sourdough, or English muffin. Just bread." So then the fine flaky bread lands on the ground the next morning. And in my mind, even as a child, it always looked like those Panko breadcrumbs – so really white and really fine. And so the Israelites pick it up, pick up this manna and they say to each other, "What is it?" And apparently when you say "What is it?" in Hebrew, it sounds a lot like the word "manna." So they called it manna. If they'd been speaking in English, we would be preaching about the *whatsit* story. So, we're all good there.

Now there's a lot of, a lot of mention of manna in Scripture. But we're not going to focus on that. You know they argue: Is it the size of the coriander seed? Is it the size of a sesame seed? Is really excrement from insects who live on the tamarisk branch? ... Yeah, I know. We don't really care about that. I think it was a miracle.

So anyway, God says, "Gather as much as you need, an omer to a person." We're not going to get hung up on the "omer." Some say it is one tenth [1/10th] of an ephah (if you know what that is). Some say it's 9.3 US dry cups. If you want to go down internet rabbit hole, Google how much is an omer. Seriously, people have spent their lives trying to figure this out by calculating the size of fingernails of people in biblical times and the average size of barley. All right. So. For our purposes this is what an omer is: an omer is *enough*. So some people gathered a lot and some people gathered little; but at the end of the day, it shook out that everybody had exactly one omer. That is income equality. This was really awesome.

Now here is where I think it gets really interesting. God said, "Eat it up. Don't try to put it in Tupperware and save it for the next day." But, of course, there's always some people that don't listen to God. And the next morning it was rotten and filled with worms, because they stored it up. Now it's easy to think that this story is just about obedience: so God said "Don't do this," they did this, then God has to punish them. But I don't think it's just about obedience.

And so then it's easy to think maybe the story is about hoarding. I think, well, it is about hoarding. But then, what's hoarding about? In this story especially, hoarding is about not being in the moment and thinking you will not have enough in the future, even though you have been promised that. So I think this story is about lack of trust: lack of trust even after God promised them manna every morning, they didn't trust God.

Now, I think for most of us here this morning – not all of us but most of us – our biggest challenge is *not* trusting that God will provide us with food and shelter *but [thinking]* that God won't provide us

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with *love*. And perhaps you're thinking what "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."² But you know what? We do things all the time that show we don't believe this. And we hoard and we hoard what we think is manna. We hoard things like compliments and attention and certainty and control. Now you may be wondering, how do you hoard compliments? Well, I'm going to tell you. I learned how to do this in seminary.

The very first week in seminary, I met a fellow student whose father was a minister, because this guy said to me, "Well, you know, it's never too early to start your Monday file." And I said, "What's that?" And so then he explained to me that his father kept every single note, letter, and complimentary card he ever received. And then on Mondays – because you're usually really exhausted after worship and that's when you start getting feedback about your sermons and so it can be really depressing – he would open up this file and read all these compliments. And so I asked this guy, I go, "Well, you know, how long do we have to do that?" Because I thought maybe it was like training wheels and you just ..., and you know ... you just do that for a little bit of time and then Phoof! you don't need it any more. And this guy goes, "Oh, man! My dad has stuff from the '50s!" I thought "Wow. Alright." So I started my Monday file. And then, I don't know, after about a year, I looked at this stuff and go, "Well, that was then. And this is now." And it wasn't really making me feel any better; it actually made me feel kind of pathetic. So I got rid of my Monday file.

Now I'm sure we've all heard the phrase: "That person is someone who sucks all the oxygen out of the room." You heard that phrase? It usually refers to someone who leaves no space for other people to talk. And they sort of take up all the emotional or, you know, energetic space in a room. Someone who sucks all the oxygen out of the room hoards attention. So can we trust that God loves us enough so that we don't have to hoard attention? Because it doesn't work anyway, right? Because then we get home and there we are. And if we haven't learned how to give ourselves loving attention and how to know that we are loved by God, we will never have enough. And we hoard certainty.

And we hoard control. Everybody loves that! We had a house guest who was crazy checking her phone to see: * Does the restaurant have our reservation? * I've got to check my freeway app to see how long it's going to take us. * I've got to check my weather app to see if I should take a raincoat. * I better go to the website to see if there's a vegan option on the menu. ... And she was totally no fun. Because she wasn't *here*. She was *there*. And she wasn't trusting. I mean, we all love that. But we can't have it all the time. We can't stockpile it. We get just enough.

But here's the craziest thing, the craziest thing that we hoard: anger and resentment. That's nothing like manna, though, right? Because anger and resentment that doesn't feed us. ... Or does it? ... I think it, it does feed us. Because it's a kind of, like, psychological jujitsu. That anger and resentment feeds us because it makes us feel a little self-righteous. So, you did something *bad* to me, so then you are *bad* – and that makes me *good*. So that eases me a little bit. So we feel a little better about ourselves. And I'm afraid that this is what is happening with our president. He was criticized by the press, for example, and that hurt his feelings; and now he resents them. And so he insults them and accuses them of fake news. And I think that for *any* of us storing up anger and resentment, it just makes for bad spiritual health, because, like stored up manna, that resentment rots. And it fills us with worms and it eats us from the inside out.

² Anna B Warner, 1860. See Hymn 327, The New Century Hymnal, 1995, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio.

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But I know that it's hard sometimes to know how much is enough. When can we let go of things?

In the late 80s I volunteered with a Seattle AIDS support group and, because caregivers of people with AIDS felt so powerless over this disease, they would work themselves into the ground trying to do things. So they'd come to support group and say, "I took him to the doctor. I picked up his meds. I cleaned his apartment. And went grocery shopping. I gave him a massage. I read to him. I made dinner. I took the cat box out. I don't know what else I can do." It was enough. More activity on the part of the caregiver wouldn't cure the person with AIDS, it would just exhaust the caregivers. So we developed this mantra:

It is enough.
You've done enough.
You are enough.

So, do we really trust God? Do we feel loved enough? Because I'm telling you, the terrain on this journey is going to get rough. I don't know if you can all see these signs³ over here, but here's the thing: Even as we're moving toward hopefulness and gratitude, we're going to have to go through the land of fear. And over here, Oh, hey, great! We're going to move toward and courage, and then we're also going to travel through regret. And I'll tell you what the choir's looking at. The choir's looking at these signs and going, "Hey, but we get to go to euphoria and trust." And then we travel to the land of sorrow.



Will there be manna in the land of sorrow? Can we trust that God will feed us? Yes! We will be fed because *this* is what the choir just sang for us this morning. You can look in your bulletin

Not one sparrow is forgotten
E'en the raven God will feed
And the lily of the valley
From his bounty hath its need.⁴

So the Israelites had to go out and gather their manna and this is an important point. God didn't just drop it into their mouths. Each one of them had to go out and gather it. And as we journey together, we, too, have to gather our own spiritual food. Not just on Sundays but *every day*. Every day. Well, what does our manna look like? What does that look like? We know that God loves us in a million different ways. One of the ways is through one another. So often times our manna will look like a smile, or a nod, or a hug, or words of comfort, or words of encouragement, or honest challenging words. God loves us through one another all the time.

³ Sign by Kris Garrett, Artist in Residence, 2017. Photo by Erin Lovejoy-Guran, Lay Ministries and Communications Director, 2017.

⁴ Shaker Hymn (Canterbury Shakers Hymnal, 1908) according to <http://www.williamhawley.net>, accessed 11/02/2017.

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And however much we gather will be an omer; it will be enough. And that is how we come before God, knowing that we are enough. There is *nothing* we need to hoard. God's *love* for us is in constant supply. We need only to trust.

It is enough.

You've done enough.

We are enough.

As we travel together as a community we travel with the promise that we will be fed. So, come hungry, taste, and see the grace eternal. Taste, and see that God is good.

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