

What is it?
October 1, 2017
Exodus 16:9-15

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"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 shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flakey substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?"^[a] For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

One of the great themes of scripture is the story of the Exodus. It is the story of liberation from slavery. The story begins in the book of Exodus in the land of Egypt. The Hebrew people ended up in Israel because of Joseph – the technicolor dream coat Joseph – who invited his family to Egypt to survive a seven-year famine. When they arrived, Joseph was second in command and the right hand of Pharaoh. Joseph was the architect of the survival plan for the famine.

But Exodus opens with a new, and concerned Pharaoh looking out over his land. The Hebrews had become so populous that he was concerned they would take over. Their ancestor Joseph was forgotten. The story of how they ended up in Egypt was forgotten. Pharaoh saw their growing ranks as a threat to his power so he deliberately set out to oppress them and enslave them. The Hebrew slaves built Pharaoh's empire with blood and sweat. There is a reason that a pyramid is the symbol of Pharaohs, theirs is a top down empire, where nothing trickles down.

Slavery was oppressive, but at least they got to eat. The Nile river valley produced an abundance of food and they at least had food to eat. This becomes an important detail as the story unfolds.

Built on cheap labor, Pharaoh expanded his storehouses, storing up more and more for himself. Pharaoh didn't understand the concept of enough. He wanted more, and more at the expense of the people on the bottom of that pyramid. There was no rest, only work.

So, begins the story of Moses and how he avoided Pharaoh's genocide. Moses is plucked out of a river by Pharaoh's daughter, raised by his own mother, and then returned to the palace once he was weaned. Moses grew up and witnessed the brutality toward the Hebrews and one incident led Moses to kill an Egyptian, which then caused him to flee for his life. He fled to the land of Midian and lived happily until God lit a burning bush in his path and tells him to go back to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and liberate the Hebrews. Moses was eighty.

After trying every excuse to get out of it, Moses does as he is told and the ten plagues finally convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go out to worship, which is really a cover for their escape. They narrowly escape when Moses parts the sea for them to cross and the sea closes back in on the Egyptians. After the singing and dancing there is silence. Now what?

In Elim, they find trees and water. So far so good. They press on from Elim and enter into the wilderness where they start looking around. Food is not abundant in the wilderness. In fact, food is

nowhere to be found. That's when they start to panic and get angry at Moses. "Did you drag us out here to kill us? At least in Egypt we had food to eat!"

This is a pivotal moment in the movement from slavery to freedom. Are they going to trust there is a better way to live or are they going to go back to what they know? Are they going to trust God or Pharaoh, who so far, has at least fed them?

Years ago, we took the girls to Jackson, Wyoming on vacation. One of our adventures was a trail ride. We all had our own horses. It was the first time on a horse for our girls. We set out on the well-worn path away from the corral. The guide assured us our girls would be okay. The other horses respond to his horse and his horse was trained not to spook. We'd be fine. About a mile from the corral, just as we started to go into the woods, a deer jumped out of the brush and practically ran into the side of the guide's horse. So much for being spook proof. All of our horses reared up and there was a moment when I thought it was over. You could feel the horses anxiety and their instinctual response to ran as fast as they can back to the corral. The guide, with his horse now under control, was trying to get them to trust him and stay the course. I just kept saying to myself, "Don't scream, don't scream, don't scream!"

When our anxiety is high we have powerful impulses to return to what is familiar, even if it is bad for us. Bad marriages, abusive relationships, life-sucking employment, even political systems. The Hebrew people were right there – right at that moment of decision. Are we going to go back or press on toward freedom?

The wilderness in the Bible is a place of testing. Jesus is tested in the wilderness. Whether it is forty years or forty days, we decide we are going to trust God and God's ways, or do what we have always done.

It is in the wilderness that we begin to see that God and Pharaoh operate out of two completely different systems. God's ways and Pharaoh's ways are completely different. It turns out God is not impressed by pyramids. God turns that system on end by valuing all those on the bottom. God inverts the pyramid. God is there for the people, not vice versa.

Let me say this again to emphasize this point. God is there for the people, not vice versa. What God was trying to accomplish in the wilderness was to create for the Hebrew people a world in which all are free. The Ten Commandments are not ridiculous rules – they are key to human existence. They are the guidelines for living as one human family. The problem is that we cannot resist the impulse to turn tail and run back to what we know – a world where neighbor is pitted against neighbor and an economy built on cheap labor and exploitation of resources. The temptation of greed and power is great. The temptation to calm our anxiety with retail therapy is real. And so begins the rat race that has us serving Pharaoh rather than living in community with God.

Manna was the hurdle in trusting God. It was completely unfamiliar to the Hebrews. So unfamiliar in fact they said, "What is it?" That is what the word manna means, "What is it?" In the book of Numbers we learn that "manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin."⁸ The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. (Numbers 11:7-8) Imagine eating that every morning for forty years!

At night the quail came and they ate. But every morning, except one, it was manna.

God gave them manna and quail. They didn't earn it. They didn't buy it. It wasn't a commodity. It was a gift from God. It was a lesson God gave them forty years to learn.

The part of the story that doesn't make the movies is God's concern about what's next. What is going to happen when the people don't have to trust God. What's going to happen when they leave the wilderness and are faced with prosperity? If they are not careful they will recreate the pyramid system all over again.

Deuteronomy 8 is a warning to not forget God in prosperity:

8 This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. 2 Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. 3 He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.^[a] 4 The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. 6 Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. 7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. 10 You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. (Paradise?)

11 Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous^[b] snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. 17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. 19 If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. 20 Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.

Just like the Hebrews, we can learn a powerful lesson from manna. But will we?

Are we going to build Pharaoh's pyramids or God's kingdom? They are not the same thing. Not even close.

If it feels like we're living in the wilderness these days – maybe we are. We are surely being tested. Before us is the choice to pledge allegiance to God or Pharaoh. As the Rev. Doctor William Barber

loves to say, “It’s not a choice between left and right. It’s a choice between right and wrong.” A system that does not value the least of these is just another pyramid scheme.

The story of manna, which we will unpack in the coming Sundays, still has much to teach us about how God wants us to live together as a human family. It also points us to the table around which we gather each week...where all are welcome, all are beloved, and everyone has enough.

It is as radical today as it was to the Hebrews in the wilderness.