

“Manna in the Wilderness”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 8, 2017

Exodus 16:1-18

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. 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.” Then the Lord said to 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. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.” Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” And 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. 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 shall 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.

“We live here now, though we always meant to leave.” So reads a line in [Gillian Wegener’s poem entitled “Chorus”](#), which describes how that which is at one time strange becomes home. She continues:

*We never meant to stay.
This place was marked as just for now, as stepping stone,
as temporary on our well-drawn maps.
But for one reason or another, years pass
and we find ourselves hot-stepping with jobs and kids
and this and that and a million little possessions.*

I love the way that she describes how inertia anchors us down. Anyone who has ever moved parents after forty years in one house knows this is true. Addresses quickly become habitual, then the only place that’s ever felt like home. Wegener captures the magnetism that familiarity possesses, because you don’t know when, as she says, “various wayfarers... will stop for lunch and find themselves staying for years’ worth of dinners.”

No wonder the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt. Even though they had been slaves there for hundreds of years, it was a familiar life—the only one these people had ever known. They had to gather

straw, bake bricks, and build monuments to Pharaoh's glory, but at least they knew their way around the place! Never mind the overseer's lash and the Egyptian soldiers' murdering their children. At least they knew where the soup rations and bread lines were, before Moses, Aaron and their God showed up and turned the world upside down. Now they're out in the wilderness, with no signs that confidently point to food, water or their hypothetical destination, the "Promised Land". All there is out here is dusty openness, with wind, hot sun, cold nights, and wild beasts. Rocky ground without much grass or nourishment. Deuteronomy (8:15) later describes it as "the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water." The wilderness is a dangerous place known only by its unknowns, its disorientation to the way things once were.

This past week has felt like such a wilderness, hasn't it? Ever since we woke up on Monday morning to news alerts about the Las Vegas shooting, we have been, in a word, "bewildered". We're all reeling from one thing after another: hurricanes, shootings, racist violence and political deadlock. The United Church of Christ's General Minister and President John Dorhauer posted on Facebook sentiments so apt that we adapted them for worship today. On Monday he wrote,

I am fast losing the capacity to mourn all that we must mourn. Charlottesville becomes Houston becomes Florida becomes Puerto Rico becomes Las Vegas [and less than a week later we must now add the Gulf Coast]. Every lost life is a name, a history, a hope, a story - an unfulfilled future. Every lost life leaves behind loved ones who mourn and grieve and piece together a future of their own torn asunder by matters we cannot comprehend. I can't find words to capture this pain, this collective grief and anger. ...When will it end?

My own reaction to this compounding grief has been to get quiet and retreat inward. I've found myself unable to talk much about current events, and I got very little done in the office this week. The spiritual practices which normally sustain my faith have failed to do so, and I've become lost in the numbing distractions of phone games. Such "turtling in" is one survival strategy for this wilderness, but it doesn't serve our long-term health.

The collective heartbreak we feel resonates further for those in wildernesses of a more personal kind. Consider how this week has felt for those who already fight every day to keep the addiction monkeys or mental illness demons away. For others, the wilderness is grief at the loss of someone dearly beloved, battling a life-changing diagnosis, or struggling to remain loyal to marriage vows. Aging itself is another kind of wilderness, as we pick our way among the stones of physical and mental limits, preparing for (or hiding from) the time when we will stretch out our hands for another to dress us; when someone will push us in a wheelchair where we do not want to go. Combine this with the long, steady needs of painstaking work for racial justice, gender equity, a sustainable climate, and adapting the Church to the twenty-first century. This is what wildernesses have come to define our days. In the poet's words, "We live here now, though we always meant to leave."

Here's the thing about today's scripture passage: it comes just a month after the ten plagues, the Red Sea escape, and freedom from Egypt! The Israelites don't know it yet, but they will have *forty years* of wilderness wandering before they enter the "Promised Land" of Canaan and Palestine. The future—even what they can see of it—looks like starvation in the desert. Of course they're complaining to Moses about having no food! But God is working something different in them, which leads not to death but to a new kind of life. Today's story of God giving quail by night and manna by morning is not really about the food. It's to help the Hebrews—and us—learn how God provides in the wilderness.

We would do well to keep in mind three things about manna in the wilderness: where it comes from, who it's for, and how it's found. First, the manna comes as a sheer gift of God, when least expected and from the unlikeliest source. Everyone knows that food comes from the earth and the sea, not out of thin air! Yet this manna arrives every morning just as the dew lifts from the ground. In the same way, God works through unexpected means to show paths in the wilderness today. How else to explain that it's

President *Trump* pushing Congress to pass a permanent Dream Act for DACA recipients? How else to wrap our heads around the fact that the *National Rifle Association* now supports restriction on gun accessories like bump stocks? God works through every open door—and some which have been impossibly locked—to give relief and save lives in the wilderness. Where will your next meal of surprising manna come from?

The second thing about this manna is the instruction God gives: only gather enough for that day's food, and make sure that all are fed. In fact, when fear of the future led some Israelites to hoard what they found, and stash it away rather than sharing, the heavenly bread turned sour and filled with maggots. God commands an equal distribution of divine abundance, which calls to mind [what Mahatma Gandhi said](#) a century ago: "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed." Are we demanding that those who already have be able to hoard more, or are we sharing to meet every need?

Finally, I noticed a third thing when looking at manna-gathering as it's been [painted through the centuries](#). In every piece of artwork we see about this story, you'll notice that people are not out there working alone. Israelites in the wilderness are always shown in groups, working together, this one pointing out where that one can reach for a bit more. They pile up the holy bread together before taking what they need to feed their families, recognizing their dependence on one another. Manna-gathering is a collaborative art, and none of us survive in the wilderness without others. I'm convinced that is one reason God maintains the church as a community of seekers in the world today. We gather here week by week to ask, "Where does heavenly manna manifest today?" and help one another find the answers that will feed us for another week. What manna is saving your life right now, and who might need to learn that from you?

Ultimately, we don't know how long we'll be in the wilderness. It could be the rest of our lives. Every single Israelite who escaped Egypt with Moses died in the desert, Moses included. Yet they were fed by God, through the manna and the quail, every day of their lives. Who knows how long it will be for us? "We live here now, though we always meant to leave." Therefore, we will do well to remember the lessons of the wilderness: glean together, share freely, and trust the skies even when they appear empty.

Let us pray: *Where we are hungry, O God, feed us. Where we are thirsty, give us drink. And lead us also into the promised land of your reign. Amen.*