

In Our Own House

by

The Reverend Franklyn C. Pottorff
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 1, 2021

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The 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.” ⁴Then 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. 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 flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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.

662. That's the number of miles on the quickest route between our manse here at the church and my parents' farm in the Midwest. 662 miles. Which means, if I did the math correctly, we had traveled a total of 0.7 miles before my younger son, Ollie, asked the question that has been haunting folks since Noah talked his kids into the Ark. "Are we there yet?"

"No, son, we have 661.3 miles to go. We aren't home yet." There's no way around it. Journeys can be difficult. The Israelites are tired. And their grumbling grows so loud it reaches the heavens. They are wondering if their leaders, Moses and his brother Aaron, have brought them out of the land of the known—even if it was known terror and enslavement by the Egyptians—to the unknown; not into freedom, but to die of starvation in the wilderness.

They are exhausted, seemingly lost, and their appetite for liberty is giving way to the empty gnawing in their stomachs.

And that's when the complaining starts. As if offered from the backseat of my SUV, I can hear it perfectly. "Have you brought us out here near the West Virginia state line to kill us? We would have been better off staying in Bryn Mawr, back at the house, where at least we had Netflix."

How quickly we forget the troubles of the past when the present offers its own. Yet, a word of caution must be sounded. We should not simply dismiss Israel's protesting as the petulant voices of the unappreciative.

Their concern is more than displeasure or discomfort; they are afraid of what will happen to them. The history of interpretation has unfortunately turned this episode into an example of faithlessness. A story from Scripture that shows us how not to be the people of God.

But the people Israel possess valid trepidations. To whom and what kind of a god are they entrusting their future? What might happen to them in the unforgiving territory in which they find themselves?

It can be frightening; an unknown tomorrow fraught with the possibility of danger or despair. Who can blame them for being afraid?

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And so it is that, perhaps out of both faithfulness and frustration, the Holy One responds to them. The Lord God provides manna, the bread from heaven, and game bird to satiate the people.

Yet as one scholar notes, these “gifts of God, manna and quail, are graceful provisions; but with them comes a kind of *torah*, explicit guidance for the ways and means by which Israel may receive the gifts, and an implicit caveat. God gives, to be sure, but the gift is to ‘test’ the sojourners as to whether they will follow the Lord’s instruction or not.”¹

Such a caveat puts us squarely between the exodus and Sinai, between the deliverance of a people and the creation of a nation-state with ethical imperatives. If this story affirms that God provides, then perhaps it also affirms that people can be hard to satisfy.

God gives them what they need on the journey, but yet they try to take more than they need, it’s never enough. Not for them, nor for us. Always wanting more. And God says, “If you want freedom, I will give it to you, but to appreciate freedom, you’ll need to understand restraint. That’s a journey that takes 40 years at least.”

All of which leads us to think about the journeys we take. And not just the ones we take to Yosemite or Australia, but the ones that we take

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. 1st ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Year B, Vol. 3, p. 290.

without ever leaving our living room. The ones we take in our hearts and minds when life throws us seemingly off course; when we discover news that leaves us breathless, or causes our pulse to rise, or turns our head spinning.

The journeys we make when our eyes gloss over and we become lost in a thousand memories that flood our senses, sometimes traveling back in time or hundreds of miles away in seconds. Those are the journeys that can be the most perilous. On the cover of the bulletin this morning is the ancient image of a labyrinth. More specifically it is the model of the famous labyrinth in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France.

It's been there, on the stone floor, surrounded by those towering gothic walls standing like ancient oaks, for well over 800 years. Pilgrims have walked its path so many times, the stones have been made smooth by the soles of the walkers' shoes.

The fascinating thing about labyrinths is their intention. They are not mazes. Unlike the legendary Greek labyrinth designed by Daedalus to house the Minotaur, they are not devised to trick you, exhaust you, or keep you confined or denied entrance.

There is only one way in, and one way out.

They take you right to the center, into the very heart of their design. They are unicursal. They symbolize a journey to a predetermined destination, like a pilgrimage to a holy site. Or the journey through life; from birth to spiritual awareness to death.

They have been referred to as a path of prayer, a walking meditation, and a mirror of the soul. There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth.

To prepare, you may want to sit quietly to reflect before walking. Some people come with questions, others just to slow down and take time out from a busy life. Some come to find strength to take the next step. Many come during times of grief and loss.

You don't have to go to France this morning to walk one though. You may trace the cover image with your finger if you like, finding your way to the center and back. On this mini-pilgrimage what you ponder, or even discover on the journey, is yours alone to ascertain. Like the Israelites, perhaps what you seek is an answer, if not to the presence of something, then perhaps to its absence.

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What is striking to me every time I encounter the biblical witness is its ability to offer new insights into words that seem to have long made their home in my bones. I never paid much attention to v.15, only as a summation of the miracle.

But listen to the encounter again in this single line of scripture. From the *Common English Bible*, "When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, 'What is it?' They didn't know what it was. Moses said to them, 'This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.'"

That's all it says. By way of scholarship, there's nothing much to comment on here. The Israelites encountered this thing they could not understand, and Moses explained it. Yet this very verse haunts me.

You see, you come here, Sunday after Sunday; bringing your hungry and tired bodies and spirits to this place, to hear some word out of the many words we offer in worship. You have come with at least a week's worth of travel and baggage; of wounds and wonders, miracles and mundane happenstances.

You hold up the recent past with your hands and you look to us, and by extension to God, and say “what is it?” What is this we hold so tightly?

And as it was with Moses, my job, and the job of clergy everywhere is to point you to the Giver who has offered it, or allowed it, and if it’s not already self-evident, to wrestle some kind of goodness out of it.

That tiny dialogue between the Israelites and Moses is a glimpse of the divine awareness to which all of us are called. When we are on a journey, and we feel a little lost or heartbroken, worn-out or famished, we look to others to help us see the provisions and blessings which have fallen on the ground in front of us.

In fact, that’s what the word *manna* actually means. It’s an ancient Semitic contraction that translates roughly into the query “what is it?” Manna is the question and the answer. Its paradoxical quality is the grappling and the gift.

That’s part of what we are doing on Sundays in this place. Coming in, finding a pew, looking at our lives and the events of our past and present, and asking “what is it?” And any pastor worth their salt would tell you: manna, it’s manna.

Now not everything that exists in our lives is manna, but there sprinkled throughout our circumstances are the blessings of God’s goodness that befall us. Manna comes in many forms beyond bread: A relationship, a place, a new opportunity, a closed door, rest: voluntary or forced, travels to locations well-worn or foreign, comforting or terrifying. It begs the question where the manna is in your own life right now. Where is the provision and sustenance? What is it?

We are, every one of us, on a journey today. And not just those of us in this sanctuary, but all of us across this little corner of the cosmos

we call home. We are moving, each in our own way and path, towards a center and a finality who is The Way at the end of all of our ways.

In these pandemic-drenched days, our journey might feel like a maze. There are certainly moments where we twist and turn with such uncertainty that we need to stop and simply catch our breath. The ever-changing guidance from the CDC is giving all of us whiplash. Even so the journey continues, because none of us are home yet.

It's why the struggles and longings continue. The work isn't done, the destination unreached. We are still walking the labyrinth, still in our own stages of wilderness. Which means we would do well to listen to our longings and the gnawing in our bellies. Where is God calling us? Who is God calling us to be?

As Frederick Buechner notes, "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger."

We are reminded that as we continue on this journey, our grumbling, our groaning, our longings and anxieties have been voiced by others before us. And that along with our ancestors, a God who hears us and claims us has promised to provide.

So whether we are lost in the caverns of our disquieted mind, or wandering somewhere near Wheeling, West Virginia on I-70, the One who created us and loves us still, offers us manna for the journey. Taste and see. Amen.