

Manna for the Moment
Exodus 16:(1-21) 22-31

Fourth Sunday in Lent/ 22nd March 2020

Last week, I joined a group of Presbyterian seminarians and pastors for evening prayer, using Zoom, of course. I know them only through Twitter; I've never met them face-to-face. In these trying times it's important for all of us, including pastors and religious leaders, to use the resources of our tradition, such as daily prayer liturgies (morning or evening prayer), to keep us focused and grounded. My experience with them was a balm for my troubled soul. The scripture text that I heard, following the daily lectionary, was the story we just heard from Exodus 16, when the Israelites were in the early days of their wilderness experience, moving from Egypt to a land of promise, a land of milk and honey. It really spoke to me. I decided to use the text last Thursday for our first Zoom Thursday Morning Bible, which we will host again this coming week. And I felt it would be helpful to spend a little more time with this remarkable story this morning. It has much to show us.

Just to set it up quickly (I invite you to read the entire chapter), God's people are moving into the wilderness of Sinai and they begin to complain to Moses. They want to go back to Egypt. They have difficulty trusting Moses and trusting God. They are caught in the wilderness, a place in-between, in-between the *known* of Egypt and the *unknown* of the Promised Land, of the future. The Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron. So God decides to provide manna, bread from heaven, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat" (Ex. 16:15). God commands the people: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person" – about 9 cups per person – "according to the number of the persons, all providing for those in their tents" (Ex. 16:16). They gathered exactly what they needed for that day. Not more than what was needed and no shortage. "They gathered as much as each of them needed" (Ex. 16:18). Manna was not to be hoarded and saved. They were commanded to receive what had been given to them *for that day*. Most did as they were told. Some tried to save it for another day, but it bred worms and became foul (Ex. 16:20). "Morning by morning they gather it," the text says, "as much as each needed" (Ex. 16:21a).

On the sixth day of the week—the day before the sabbath when the gathering of manna was not allowed as it was "a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD," (Ex. 16:23)—they gathered twice as much and set some aside for the sabbath morning. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD" (Ex. 16:26). But some would not listen. Some went out on the sabbath thinking they would find manna. And so Moses reminds them that God has given them a sabbath, a time to rest and be renewed. Moses says—and these words leapt off the page for me this week—"each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day" (Ex. 16:26). *Stay where you are. Do not leave your place.*

It's too soon to tell, but I have a feeling during this time of physical distancing and self-isolation, with more time at home with loved ones or more time alone and connecting in other ways, adjusting to a new rhythm of our daily lives, the notion of sabbath as gift might take on new meaning. Sabbath is a time to fully trust in the provision of God, to acknowledge that we can't do everything, that there are things beyond our control. It's a time for us to stop. Our work

must stop for a time. The call to sabbath is a guard against us over-performing, over-functioning, of trying to do too much, which, in a time such as this, easily becomes an ineffective way of dealing with our anxiety about what tomorrow might be, as we move into an unknown. We need time to rest so that we have the strength to be effective in the work God is calling us to do, resting in God even as we walk through this COVID-19 health crisis.

Last Sunday for our intercessory prayer service, I asked Doug to play the beloved hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” It has that marvelous refrain: “Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; All I have needed thy hand has provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”¹ Morning by morning. “Morning by morning they gathered the manna, as much as each needed...”

As we journey through *this* wilderness, as we hear troubling stories coming from Italy, Spain, the rest of Europe, as we hear the news from Seattle, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, as we move through this trying time full of unknowns, our anxiety is high and we are scared and worried for our loved ones, especially the elderly and those with underlying health issues. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the news, news that is quickly changing by the hour. And we wonder when it will end and when we can go back to some semblance of normalcy. No one knows for sure.

What has given me some comfort and helped calm my nerves is living one day at a time. Living “morning by morning” and looking for the manna that is given to us fresh daily. Focusing on today, this moment, this hour, this day, helps to keep me from being overwhelmed by the thoughts and fantasies we are so good at creating about tomorrow and the future. If we’re overwhelmed by worrying about what might be, what tomorrow or next week will be like, we won’t have the emotional, physical, and spiritual resources needed for the facing of today. Someone said that this race is a marathon, not a sprint, and so we need to measure our energy, care for ourselves, trust in the resources provided.

Several years ago I learned the value of living one day at a time when I started to walk the Camino, the ancient pilgrim route that runs across the north of Spain to Santiago de Compostela. It’s a 500-mile trek from the French border at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago. And I feel for the people suffering in Spain today and all those whose livelihood depends on the tens of thousands of pilgrims who walk the Camino every year but aren’t walking now. Four years ago, I remember that the first couple of days I was feeling anxious and overwhelmed by the prospect of walking 500 miles across Spain—something I’ve never done before. Around the third day the Camino taught me an important lesson. Thinking that far ahead into the future was not helpful. I realized that thought was not serving me well. In fact, thinking that way made it difficult to walk the road right in front of me. So I focused on each step. I took each day with its strides. I walked ten miles one day and fourteen miles another day and some days no miles at all, I would rest. I focused on each day, what was set before me. Morning by morning. One day at a time. And about thirty-five days later I had walked 500 miles across Spain. This is what’s helping me manage my anxieties, at least for today.

So what is manna for you these days? At this moment, today, what or who is your manna? What’s feeding you? What’s sustaining you? Actually, these are good questions to ask

ourselves every day. Morning by morning or evening by evening as we close our eyes and try to sleep, try to rest in God, try to trust in God to provide what we need, let us look for the manna. One day at a time.

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Israelites Gathering Manna, Woodcut from the *Nuremberg Bible*, German, 15th Century, Cleveland Museum of Art.

¹ “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” Text by Thomas O. Chisholm and music by William Marion Runyan (1923).