

“Wilderness Food”
Exodus 16:1-21
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #71
16th Sunday After Pentecost
28th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
9.20.20

Exodus 16:1-21 CEB

16 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Sin desert, which is located between Elim and Sinai. They set out on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt.**2** The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. **3** The Israelites said to them, “Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. **5** On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.” **6** So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “This evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. **7** And in the morning you will see the Lord’s glorious presence, because your complaints against the Lord have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?” **8** Moses continued, “The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the Lord heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.”

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the Lord, because he’s heard your complaints.’” **10**

As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

11 The Lord spoke to Moses, **12** “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’”

13 In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp.

14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. **15** 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. **16** This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.’” **17** The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. **18** But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat. **19** Moses said to them, “Don’t keep any of it until morning.” **20** But they didn’t listen to Moses. Some kept part of it until morning, but it became infested with worms and stank. Moses got angry with

them. **21** Every morning they gathered it, as much as each person could eat. But when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, they forgot. Our ancestors were delivered 27 verses ago from Pharaoh's army and now they're ready to go back to have their fill of food in Egypt. Now, I will say the Israelites are approaching three months since their deliverance from Egypt to freedom, but it

stands to show us how forgetful humans tend to be when times are tough.

The Hebrews are freaking out. They are in hysterics and reminiscing about the “good ole days” they had in Egypt where they had their fill of meat and bread. At least in captivity, they could die with full tummies instead of dying of hunger while free in the desert.

But, what does God do? The same thing God does every time the people complain: God shows how gracious and loving God is.

While God provides the food our forebears need in the wilderness, there is human responsibility. For example, Exodus 16:4 says:

I'm going to make bread rain down from the sky for you.

The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I'll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction.

God is promising food every day for these people. God is promising them enough for this chosen congregation. And if you need to remember if God is good on God's promises, just go back to Exodus 2:23 when God heard the Hebrews' cries and remembered the covenant made all those years ago with Abraham and Sarah. So, yes, the LORD will make sure the children are fed.

But, there's something else to this. Notice God instructs the people to collect just enough for that day and for their families. The

passage says about an *omer* per person, which comes out to about two quarts. It's enough for the day. It's enough to continue their journey in the wilderness, which will take a lot of time. It's enough to get them to the Promised Land!

And to remind them of their Sabbath duties, which is to rest, they will collect twice as much on the sixth day of each week. To remind them to rest, to remind them of their responsibility, and to remind them that they are not masters of their own destiny. Their destiny rests in God's hands.

Something that strikes me and maybe you as well happens in verses 19-20. Moses instructs the Israelites not to hoard and keep

this food for the morning. Don't store any away for the sake of storing away or it will ruin. But, people didn't listen to him. The heavenly provisions began to rot and became infested with worms. And Moses becomes angry.

I find that fascinating. Especially since we are in the midst of stewardship season and in our own desert right now. This pandemic has become our Sin Desert. Sin being shorthand for Sinai, which is where the Hebrews will dwell for a time on their journey. This is where we are. Stepping forward toward a new life.

But, times are tough. Just like they were for the great congregation of Israelites. Everything is uncertain. We may not know what the

next meal will be. And yes, we are complaining, too. That's human nature. I've certainly done my fair share of it since March. Like our ancestors in the wilderness all those years ago, maybe we have forgotten and we cry out. And God hears our complaints. And God responds faithfully with our own bread and quail to get us through. Enough food, enough resources, enough strength to get us to tomorrow.

But, there is something we must do. Collect enough for the day and on the sixth day, we will collect double to cover the seventh day. Now, I had to sit with this for a bit. Of course, resting on the Sabbath is an important rule that God has dictated throughout the scriptures, going all the way back to resting on the seventh day after creating the world. But, even in this time in the desert, there

are some important reminders on how to be wise stewards of what God has given the Hebrews and us.

Terrence E. Fretheim in his commentary on Exodus gives us three things to think about regarding God's actions in the Sin Desert.¹

First, even in this chaotic time, God is still telling us to take time to rest. And during a pandemic, that is hard, especially when some places are still shut down. Rest is part of "God's created order" and we can't forget that if God rested, too, it must be important.² That's how we can still catch our breaths in the midst of chaos to give us focused minds and hearts. Second, yes, there is rest, "but not at the expense of daily needs".³ God has given us what we need and that includes our muscles and brains. There's daily work for us to

¹ Terrence E. Fretheim. *Exodus*. John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1991. p.185.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

do and there is time to rest. There is human agency, that is, a human response to God's instructions, for us to enjoy God's gifts to us even during these strange times. Finally, the gathering of provisions is for "one day at a time".⁴ This is not a time to hoard. And if you wonder what hoarding does, just look at chapter 16 verse 20:

But, they didn't listen to Moses.

Some kept part of it until morning,

but it became infested with worms and stank.

Moses got angry with them.

⁴ *ibid.*, 186.

Hoarding does no one any good, even the hoarders. Take what you need so others may have enough, too. If you need a reminder how bad hoarding is, just think of the toilet paper shortage. It does no one any good.

Of his three observations on this passage, his third resonates the loudest to me. One day at a time, give us this day our daily bread, and cast our anxieties on the LORD our God! If God has given us what we need, how will we respond with the offering of our tithes and gifts in the midst of chaos? Will we respond in faith and wisdom knowing God is right here with us? Or will we respond in the spirit of scarcity and hoard what we have?

I know it's hard right now. Pollocksville Presbyterian has stood up in the aftermath of numerous crises in its 152 years, most recently Hurricane Florence, and given freely to continue the work the LORD has called us to do in this community. While there will always be some sort of anxiety and fear in the air, we can acknowledge it and give it over to God. When fear starts harassing us, we can first think of Exodus and then we can think about God's work in our own lives. When anxiety tempts us to hoard, we can think about that "lovely" verse in chapter 16 about the food rotting and infested with worms.

How is the Spirit leading us today to give freely as God has given freely to us as we move forward through this wilderness? What is

the wilderness food God has graciously given us to face each day during this crisis?

Friends, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.