

**Special Bread**  
**Exodus 16:1-15**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**July 19, 2020**

**Exodus 16:1-15**

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. <sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>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?" <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses and said, <sup>12</sup>"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.'"

<sup>13</sup>In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.

**Prayer for Illumination**

Gracious God,  
we do not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from your mouth.  
Make us hungry for this heavenly food,  
that it may nourish us today  
in the ways of eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

## Sermon

Human memory can be remarkably pliable.<sup>1</sup> Just WHAT we remember... and HOW we remember it... can change with the passing of time. A most unpleasant person in life somehow isn't as unpleasant in death. A difficult experience that almost did us once we get on the other side, wasn't as bad as we once thought. Whether our memory is of people or experiences, it can be remarkably pliable... enabling us to essentially re-write history depending on our current circumstances or our present needs.

The previous chapter in the Book of Exodus - Chapter 15 - finds God's Israelite children safely on the other side of the Red Sea. They're beginning to make some headway on their journey through the Sinai desert... but three days pass without a water break. With their tongues sticking to the roof of their mouths, they grumble against Moses... one translation says they murmured against Moses (what a great word, right?) they murmur against Moses... Moses cries out to God... and God leads them to an oasis at Elim where they could enjoy twelve springs and seventy palm trees. Having been in that very desert less than a year ago (albeit in an air-conditioned travel coach with as much bottled water as I could drink) ... I can easily imagine them wanting to just stay right there in that oasis.

However, that was not to be and as the curtain rises on our story for today, Israel has left her comfy oasis... she's trudging through the desert wilderness... when she realizes her lunchboxes and water bottles are empty again. Aching with hunger and baked by the desert sun, this is when their memories started to play tricks on them... because suddenly, in their minds, Egypt's "house of bondage and land of death" began to look like an all-inclusive Caribbean resort. The Nile River, which had been full of their dead babies, was now cool and refreshing... and the land of Egypt a 24-7 all-you-can-eat buffet. And now, hungry as they had ever been and having re-written their very recent history, Israel was willing to make a trade. Like their ancestor, Esau... who was so famished he gave up his birthright for the meal before him, Israel was willing to swap her freedom for Egypt's bread and meat. And the whole congregation complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

Now, lest we look down our collective nose at these ancestors in faith, let's admit a couple of things. First, let's admit we're not so different, are we? How often have we thought, or even murmured, something like: "If only we were back in the good old days when things... (and then you would fill in what the good old days were like for you). If only we were back in a simpler time... if only we were back in a better time... if only we were back..." We, too, are guilty of remembering "the times gone by" as being better than they really were... so we know what that's like.

And the second thing to admit is how often... as God's people... that our unhappiness with our circumstances... has led us to complain against our leaders. Israel's unhappiness with her circumstances (I think today we might say she was "hangry")... is expressed in her unhappiness with the leaders God used to free her from slavery... so she accuses Moses and Aaron of not just leading them out of Egypt's bounty, but of intentionally orchestrating their death by starvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Bratt, Center for Excellence in Preaching, September 28, 2018.

Friends, I've been a pastor a long time... long enough to know for a fact that those of us who are called to lead communities of faith are far from perfect – present company INCLUDED! We say things we wish we could take back... we do things we regret doing... we fail to do things we wish we had done. Yet, I have also seen... more times than I want... that when anxiety is high within a community of people – whether that be a nation or a local community or a church – when anxiety is high – too often that anxiety is channeled into complaining about its leaders... criticizing their words and actions... murmuring about their character and their motivations. Remember... none of this was Moses or Aaron's idea. In fact, Moses was quite content to live out his retirement in Midian. What's more, they were simply doing God's work... work, we might add, which was inspired by the Israelites' groaning in the first place. And yet, when anxiety distorts our memory of the past... when anxiety leads us to make bad choices... anxiety can also lead us to complain against our leaders.

What's striking about these complaints against these particular leaders is how God responds. God doesn't speak harshly to Moses as he will later when the grumbling starts again. And God doesn't rain down judgment on these ungrateful, murmuring people. Instead, by stepping Moses altogether, God simply addresses the complaint and gives the people what they need – which is, of course, food. There will be bread from heaven each morning – bread graciously given out of God's rich storehouse so that it doesn't need to come from Pharaoh's storehouses. And Quail... quail is given each evening to satisfy their yearning for meat which apparently, they are accustomed to eating. And then, there is even a special provision for the sabbath – so that the bread given on the sixth day is enough for the seventh as well... the sabbath can be observed... and no one will go hungry. Friends, this is one of those Bible stories of God's unmerited grace – like Jesus' story of the workers in the vineyard who came late in the day and got paid like everybody else or the young son who squandered everything having a big party thrown in his honor. Bread and quail freely given to these fickle complainers... God's unmerited grace! Yet as we read, this grace is not only a gift... it is also a test... a test of who these people really are.

God is curious about these people - now six-weeks or so into their journey... they've seen what God can do – at the Red Sea and in leading them to water of the oasis. And now as this gracious God continues to provide for their material needs, God wonders where they are – whether they understand just who is providing for them... and whether they're willing trust enough to follow this Provider's rules: (rules like don't worry about there being enough... don't take more than you can eat in one day... make sure to observe the sabbath). Are these people ready to live differently? God wants to know. Or will they be the same people they were in Egypt just in a different place?

Well, in order for them to really “get” this, Moses and Aaron gather the people around and they speak to them. And when they speak to them, they emphasize two things. First, they emphasize that God has HEARD them. Four times in a few short verses, we read how God listens to and hears their complaint. The second thing they emphasize is that now – having been HEARD by God - now they will now KNOW beyond a shadow of a doubt it was Yahweh that rescued them at the Red Sea... it was Yahweh that quenched their thirst at Elim... and it is Yahweh that is now filling their empty bellies... each morning and each evening – every day. They will know! And then, there's a third thing that Moses and Aaron did when they had them all gathered. They turned them all around so that everybody was facing the wilderness.

Everything they had to go through to get to the Promised Land was stretching out in front of them... And it was there – right there before them in the desert – that the glory of the Lord appeared to them in the cloud. (pause) Now, here's why that's important. The Israelites were terrified... not to mention they were famished. They know the way ahead is not going to be easy – because in addition to the scarcity of food and water they know the wilderness was filled with all kinds of danger: snakes, scorpions, wild animals. So, they wanted to make a 180-degree turn. They wanted God to rewind the video of “salvation history” and return them to their “home” in Egypt which they, in their distorted memories, had made into Lake Wobegon. If God had answered, “Yes” to her prayers, Israel would have ended up back in Egypt. But God didn't answer “Yes,” which means God didn't give Israel what she prayed for. Instead... in his grace and wisdom, the Lord gives Israel what she *needs*. You see, God now has his people right where God wants them – at a place where they must totally depend on God for their well-being and survival... a place where God can mold them and shape them into a people that will be the blessing God told Abraham they would be. So, God has Israel in this anxious and fragile place... and it's as if the Lord gently puts his hands on the Israelites' shoulders... these people whose hearts and faces are so focused on looking back toward Egypt, the Lord puts his hands on their shoulders and gently turns them toward the way ahead. And when God turns them toward the way ahead – toward the challenges and deprivations that lie ahead, what do the Israelites see? Well, not only deprivation and challenge, but also “the glory of the Lord.” They see *God himself* in the cloud. I don't know about you, but that's an image I need to hold on to right now... and to remember that whatever comes in the days to come, God is already there... God's GLORY is already there.

So, here's what I want us all to hear... because honestly, this is what I am preaching to myself this morning. This story – with its promise of good bread – is not a story for ALL times in Israel's life... it is a story for the WILDERNESS times in Israel's life. When Israel finally gets to the Promised Land... this land flowing with milk and honey, the manna will cease. She won't need it any longer. THIS special bread – this bread from heaven – is given to Israel in the wilderness... when she is anxious about her future... when she is staring down a long, difficult journey... when she is fresh out of her own resources and must fully depend on God. and so, it is with us... when WE are fresh out of our own resources and must fully depend on God. And the promise is... in those times... this special bread will be there... and God will give us precisely what we need.