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Exodus 16:1-36
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Quail and Manna for Dinner

Thanks Ms. Renee for talking about chicken nuggets. This is about the time in the service when our hunger pains start to intensify and we all start looking at our watches wondering... Is it going to be a long sermon today? Or is the Lord going to be gracious to us and get us out of here in time for lunch?

I don't know about you. But when I get hungry, my ability to listen shuts down. Not only that, but I can get a little grumpy as well. Do we have any one who would admit that they get a little "hangry" sometimes?

Guess what? The Israelites in our scripture today also got "hangry" as they wandered in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. But their waiting wasn't just for a few minutes until lunchtime. It lasted for years. Forty years to be exact. Now that is a long time to be "hangry." And to make matters worse, they directed their hangriness toward their faith community's leadership. Let's don't ever do that! I promise that I won't be hangry with you if you would promise the same kindness toward me in return. Deal?

To provide a little context to our story today, Moses and Aaron had just led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into freedom. About 2 million of them. They had just witnessed how the Lord parted the waters for them to cross through the Red Sea safely but then caused them to come crashing down onto Pharaoh's army destroying them all.

When the Israelites came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, about 45 days after leaving Egypt, people started to get hangry. Really hangry, which led them to grumble. "At least back in Egypt, we had roofs over our heads and food on our tables." Forgetting the fact that it came the cost of meaningless slave labor making mud bricks day after day after day. It's amazing how we forget the misery we once experienced when we get "hangry." We'd do anything, say anything, just to satisfy our intense cravings.

Join me as we read from Exodus 16:1-36 and we hear this story of how God deals with their hangriness.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I remember when our kids were small and we used to say at mealtimes... "You get what you get and you don't pitch a fit." Or maybe we've heard the saying "Beggars can't be...choosers." I'm not saying that these are these best parenting phrases to use, but they do point to a truth identified in our story today.

But don't they also describe the essence behind our much loved church potlucks? That's why we call them pot-lucks. It isn't a coordinated meal. Everyone brings something. We hopefully get to taste everything that is brought... unless it's Sue Holcomb's rhubarb pie...in which case we better get it fast. But what shows up at a potluck is what we eat. And if we end up with all desserts... which has happened before...guess what...we enjoy those desserts and re-strategize next time by bringing a main dish.

But we Presbyterians love picnics and potlucks. You can't spell Presbyterian without those P words.

A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter.

"This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding, Padre."

There are several things I'd like to lift up from this story today as we continue learning about how our times of feasting are opportunities to experience the risen Lord together.

First, God always provides what we need, but not necessarily what we want. Second, our attitude is everything when those provisions are meager. Third, God's provisions come through both miraculous and ordinary means. And finally, God's provisions are to be shared, not to be hoarded for ourselves.

The first truth that we see in this story is that God always provides what we need, but not necessarily what we want. The Israelites wanted to return to slavery in Egypt, because that was what was familiar, though it was miserable. It was easier than having to chart new territory through the wilderness where things would be uncertain, unpredictable, and out of their control. Something as routine as finding food for the day would become a huge challenge in the wilderness. Unless God came through. Which God did by providing manna or bread from heaven. We are told that "Some gathered much, some gathered little. But each gathered exactly what they needed."¹

How true that is with us at times. We sometimes settle for what is comfortable as opposed to charting new territory. When you read through the 2018 Annual Report, this past year was marked by charting new territory.

¹ Exodus 16:17-18

This summer, I traveled around southern Italy with my son, Rhyan, my dad, and my nephew. Each day was an adventure navigating through a different culture, speaking a foreign language, and trying delicious new foods. Imagine the feasts we would have missed out on if we had simply settled for the McDonalds everyday.

This is a picture of a little bistro in San Gimignano, Tuscany, that we stumbled into just outside the city gates. It was known for its bruschetta, which is kind of like garlic bread with tomatoes and melted mozzarella cheese piled on top. What if we had just walked passed this little place? What if we had not taken the time to slow down to explore? We would have missed out on a heaven come to earth moment where God provided something special for us to eat. God not only fed our bodies, but he fed our souls. Getting hungry yet?

Jesus said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to their life?”²

We aren't to worry because God will always take care of what we need. Again sometimes he may even surprise us.

But what if those needs don't actually match up with what we want? Right?

Having a positive attitude about what God provides is everything especially when those provisions are meager. There is a scene from Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* that comes to mind. Bob Cratchet and his family are sitting down to their Christmas feast which is a modest goose, a few roasted potatoes, and a smallish sized plum pudding. His wife becomes grumpy because their meal is meager due to Ebenezer Scrooge's stinginess toward his employee. It could be so much better if he were fairly paid for his hard labor. Yet Bob encourages her to show some charity in front of the children toward Mr. Scrooge for what he had provided their family that day. And they all raise a glass and toast “To Mr. Scrooge.”

In the same way, the Apostle Paul said, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is like to be in need, and I know what it is like to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.”³

The next thing we see is that God's provisions are sometimes miraculous and sometimes quite ordinary. In a couple of weeks, we will look at the story of Elijah

² Matthew 6:25-27

³ Philippians 4:11-13

who was fleeing for his life from the evil queen Jezebel. Elijah ends up being fed by some ravens and a poor widow. It's a story that demonstrates how he experiences God's presence through both the miraculous and the mundane.

As the Israelites were struggling, God answered their "hangry" cries for something more. God rained down manna from heaven in the mornings and sends quail in the evenings. Manna or mannhu comes from the Hebrew word "question" and when prefixed to hu it literally means "What is it?" Or it could even be an adaptation of the Egyptian word for food, mennu which could be "Is it food?" The truth is that manna has puzzled folks for ages. It was white, flavorful, sweet like honey, and resembled the seed of coriander.⁴

However we try to make sense of this bread from heaven or the quail, the fact is that it was quite miraculous and it sustained the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness.

There are two personal stories that come to mind of God's provision for us in a time when we really needed it.

I know I've told this story before but I think it warrants telling again. Shortly before our oldest daughter, Maddy, was born almost 21 years ago, Karen had stopped working and I was unexpectedly laid off from a job. We had gone from two professional incomes to no income except for unemployment benefits. When those ran out six months later and with a new child and a mortgage to pay, we weren't sure how we would cover our expenses. I had started a new business that began to cover some bills, but honestly, to this day, I cannot figure out how we made things work. God provided for us quite miraculously.

Another time during my Young Life tenure as a new Area Director in Sammamish Washington, finances again ran thin. Young Life staff are responsible for raising 100% of their support and being that my congregants were high school and junior high students, fund raising wasn't so easy. I had to reduce my salary to 75% and then 50%. With two young children at the point, it was super hard. Karen remembers my boss' wife taking her grocery shopping and just filling her cart full of items that we needed.

Again God provided, not so miraculously, but through the simple kindness of a friend who knew we were in need and shared from their abundance.

Which leads into my last observation from this text. God's provisions are to be shared, but not hoarded for ourselves.

Jesus told a parable about "The ground of a certain man which produced a good crop. The man thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops."

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Then he said to himself, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store up my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.”

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Jesus said, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”⁵

Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable, the Israelites weren’t to stock pile the food that God provided for them. They were to use only what they could gather and share with those who needed it. But when they did try to stock pile it for later use, what happens? The manna and the quail spoil and were full of maggots. Yuck!

Now I don’t think that either of these examples were ever intended to be anti retirement rhetoric. The reality is that the concept of retirement is a modern, first world luxury. It is not a global reality. The real question is, how can we be rich toward God and not so focused on ourselves?

It begins by not thinking that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions. By not being owned with the rise and fall of the stock market. By considering how we can be channels of resources God has entrusted to us and share them with those who need them most. Or by opening up our homes and sharing our tables with those who are in need of human connection.

God shows up when we least expect it. It’s amazing how it is during those lean times that we look back with such fondness and remember how happy and joyful we were when life was simpler.

I want to close with the following story about how God can miraculously provide. “In 1880, a Christian couple, George and Sarah Clarke, purchased the lease for the Pacific Beer Garden.

Promptly dropping the word Beer, the couple added the word Mission, and launched a ministry to homeless alcoholics and downtrodden men and women. Thus was born the Pacific Garden Mission of Chicago—the Old Lighthouse—the second oldest rescue mission in the United States.

Colonel and Mrs. Clarke bore the cost of the mission themselves, but as expenses grew and the ministry expanded, their funds ran low. Eventually the day came when they could not pay the rent. Attempts to secure the needed funds failed, and Colonel Clarke was told he had only 24 hours to make the payment. Otherwise, he would lose his lease, and the Pacific Garden Mission would close.

⁵ Luke 12:16-21

Throughout the night, Colonel and Mrs. Clarke prayed, asking God to guide and to provide in his own way and time. They reminded the Lord of the men and women whose lives were being salvaged. They asked him why they should find themselves in such dire straits while trying to do his work. But, determining to trust and not question, they continued praying and trusting until the breaking of dawn.

When they came out for their house that morning, they gasped. It was covered with something white, something that instantly reminded them of the Israelites' manna. Looking closer, they discovered their lawn was filled with mushrooms of the very best quality, which was quite mysterious because it wasn't the season for mushrooms.

Gathering the crop, the Clarkes carted the mushrooms down the street and sold them to the chefs at a famed restaurant, for a large price. Their receipts were enough to pay the rent, with enough left over to meet other ministry expenses.

So, the Pacific Garden Mission carried on, its work undeterred.”⁶

My friends, I know this story is true because I have watched for 14 years how God provides for our ministry though our reserves often look meager.

So may we know that God always provides what we need, but not necessarily what we may want. May we keep our attitudes positive when those provisions are meager. And may we always consider how we can share God's provisions with others and not simply hoard them for ourselves.

By the way, “Why is manna from heaven like horse hay? They are both food from aloft.”

Amen!

⁶ Sandi Patty and Larnelle Harris, *I've Just Seen Jesus* (J. Countryman Books, forthcoming), pp. 4-5 taken from Preaching Today Website at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?query=exodus%2016:1-36&type=>