

A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick
“Manna from Heaven”
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 16:2-15

Back when I was at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, the plum summer internship was a “bar ministry” in a resort town where your job was to wear a clerical collar around the community and to the bar scene in the evenings. I was sorely disappointed when God never called me to that position, but one of my good friends did get the job one summer. He told me the major part of his job was to sit in the bars at night and talking to the vacationers. (I said it was a plum job!) Almost every evening someone would approach him and say that they did not believe in God. His answer was to ask them to tell him about this God which they did not believe. They would rant and rave about how you can’t believe in a God that well, you know.... allows hurricanes like Ike, allows downturns in the economy leaving people with mortgage crisis and filled with uncertainty and insecurity, or allows cancer to affect people you love. When the individual finished their list, my friend would then say, “No, I guess I wouldn’t believe in that God either..., now let me tell you about the God in which I believe.

I thought about my friend and his ministry after 9/11 and during the yearly anniversaries since those terrible events of that day. You see, that event that we again commemorated a week and a half ago, could have been the event in our common history where people did not see God’s presence, where unbelievers would state, ‘how could there be a God if things like this are allowed to happen. It would have stood to reason if that had been the defining moment in modern day history that people used to describe their atheism and instead it has become a defining faith moment for many. On that day in history, we witnessed people turning to their faith for comfort. We as a county witnessed and felt God’s presence so deeply in those first days after the attack. Our country went to church, to temple, and mosques to pray for God’s help and presence. We witnessed God in the acts of compassion and love and in the strength of character we saw in each other. People volunteered to help; the Red Cross actually had too many offers of blood donations. And we witnessed the importance and power of love in those last phones calls made by people who knew that their death was imminent and by the individuals who held on to each other as they fell to

their deaths from the twin towers. In spite of the horror of the events, the horror did not win; as God's gift of love conquered. When I rethink the day now 7 years later, it is those acts of love and grace which stand out. There was no cry of disbelief; God was there. Within the horror, there was God's love and grace.

But, in this morning's scripture we have another one of those cries of disbelief. It is the cry of disbelief because things are not going well. The Jews have escaped the captivity of Egypt and are in the wilderness under the direction of Moses and Aaron. They are frightened, hungry, and angry that they left the security of their captivity in the bonds of slavery in Egypt to be freed to starve to death. They did not have faith that God was there for them and they cried out to Moses. And God responded so that they would know that God is there. Listen now for the word of the Lord as it is written in Exodus 16:2-15.

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. "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."

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. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." 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, 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? 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.

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in a cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "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.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 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. 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.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The wilderness is clearly a profoundly troubling place for the Israelites; their food crisis has become a huge faith crisis! Moses has brought them out of the bonds of slavery by Pharaoh in Egypt into freedom. Although free, the necessities for survival were not being met as they traveled through the wilderness. Anxiety over what they would eat and drink was high. They turned to Moses and Aaron, their leaders and complained. Egypt was remembered favorably as they cried ‘At least in bondage we had food, now we will perish!’ The Israelites were willing to return back to Pharaoh. They did not have faith that God would provide. In Egypt, at least, they had flesh pots and bread... So, they wanted to go back and choose full bellies and oppression over starvation with freedom. Their complaints and arguments to Moses and Aaron were statements of their disbelief in God. They were not able to have faith that God would provide everything they needed for survival, everything required for life.

And God answered their cries with ongoing generosity. Food would be provided. God responded that food would literally rain on them. Life and blessing abound and God is in the ordinary work of providing daily sustenance. And it was to be provided in such a beautifully thoughtful way that there was no need at all for hoarding. Each day their daily needs would be met and God even made special provision for the Sabbath. That day’s food would be provided the day before, so that Sabbath laws could be kept and Sabbath observed. God provides! There is no reason for the Israelites to be anxious. There is no reason for them to have concerns as God’s generosity to the Israelites has been shown.

So what is the message and good news for us today? Certainly in the story is a message of the importance of keeping the Sabbath. God so wants us to take a day off each week to relax and reflect on what we have, what we are given, and what our personal ministries should be, that God provided enough

food in the wilderness for the Israelites to do just that. Sabbath keeping should be a priority in our lives as faithful followers of God.

There is also a message here about not hoarding. God wants us to have what we need for each day and God will provide for tomorrow. Some commentaries say that this speaks to the sharing of our natural resources and that God has made a planet that can sustain all life with food and water if we share. I also think it speaks to the importance of not making accumulation of possessions a priority. If you believe God provides, the anxiety and preoccupation with accumulating resources is diminished and manageable.

But I see another message in this story from Exodus as well. As I mentioned in the beginning of the sermon, too often crises in peoples' lives creates a crisis in their faith as well. Where is God in this awful catastrophe? Like the Israelites crying out of fear that they will starve in the wilderness, the crisis leads to a feeling of being abandoned by God. But the Israelites found out that they were not abandoned at all. God was there and so cared for the Israelites that their everyday needs were met. Perhaps the message here is that we are not to look to God just in all those "mountain top" miracles. God's real work is in God's connection with our daily life. We need to learn to look for God in the everyday ordinary acts of beauty and wonder. God is the creator of this very beautiful morning, of each sunny day. God created the yummy taste of each ripe apple and the wonderful smell of a tomato just picked off a vine. God is the divine factor in the warm handshake and hug as we greet each other, and is the author of the smile on a child's face during the children's sermon. And God cares for us in such a way as to care for our daily bread. The good news is that God is in the smallest daily beauties of your life and when you begin to experience God in the daily occurrences of life, you know God's presence is as close as your breath.

God is with us at all times. That is one of the messages in this passage this morning. God cares about us so intimately that God even cares about our daily bread. God gives us the gift of manna from heaven whether it comes in the form of something that sustains us physically or in the knowledge that God is holding us, loving us, and caring for us in each stage of our life. God cares for the infants in our church and the oldest members of our church community. God has given us the harvest but God also gives us the security in knowing that we are cradled in God's arms throughout our whole lives.

Yesterday we had our annual Deacon retreat where the deacons meet to not just learn what it is to be called to be a deacon and what their tasks will be, but for some aid and support in how to do the ministry. Many deacons are nervous about making calls to members who are hospitalized when they deliver flowers, or they have anxieties about their visiting people in their homes. What will they say to the woman they visit in a nursing home that will make a difference in the person's life. How will they witness God's love each person they are visiting. And each year, I admit that being called to be Christ's hands and heart is over whelming, but we can do the work with the knowledge that God is with us and will guide us. I confess that I too feel inadequate and uncomfortable when I visit someone for the first time (and sometimes for the second and third time as well). I share with the deacons that each time before I enter someone's hospital room and each time before I visit a member at home stop before I knock on the door and pray. I pray to God that I am used to do God's work. I do this with the faith that God is with me just as God is with each of you in all your activities. This is because we can have faith that God will provide what is needed. God will provide the manna from heaven whether it is the right words and actions while doing the work of a deacon, the ministry of an elder, or working in the nursery during church or teaching a high school Sunday school class. We live with the knowledge that we are never alone. God is with us in everything that we do. And that news is manna from heaven! – Amen.

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