

9/20/20 Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 16:2-31

New Revised Standard Version

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

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 the 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. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'"

The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none."

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day.

The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded..."

The Word of Our Lord.

Sermon "Alternative Community of Bread & Rest" Minister David Jones

At our prayer service this past Wednesday, about ten of us gathered around our socially-distanced circle. Even as we spread out to accommodate new arrivals, I felt the rustling leaves overhead and the soft sunlight begin to draw us nearer together. It was our third in-person prayer service so far, and my own experience of these has been that they are kind of a microcosm of what our church has worked hard to achieve for our church community during this time: despite all the strange new practices intruding into our time together--masks and hand sanitizers, the physical distance denying us the embraces of greetings or much needed consoling touch--we nonetheless remain as focused as ever on connecting heart to heart, on connecting spirit to spirit, on really seeing and hearing and feeling what each other is experiencing.

And this past Wednesday, as I gathered the many prayers of both deep concern and great joy into a final, concluding prayer, I noticed out of this connection how similar our prayers

really are. They only rarely name the same people or the same illness or the same fear; they frequently remind us how unique each of our joys are, and how each of us will experience the world that we share in very different ways. But--maybe it is because of the task I assign myself (or that I accept from your calling me here)--despite this tremendous variety and the rich diversity of the lives we are each leading, I nonetheless perceive by faith that at bottom--deep within the wells of our discrete identities--is the same spring that nourishes and animates us all. It just is a simple fact that when it comes right down to it, seen from a great height or the very depths, we *are* essentially the same.

Now it is banal or cliché just to say that. But if we begin to *believe* in it, really believe *in it*--if from that simple fact we come to define ourselves and come to act according to that definition, if we then think about God in this way, our scriptures in this way, faith more generally *in this way* and finally if we set out on a road together and take aim at something new in this way--then we would gain what Walter Brueggemann calls the "prophetic imagination." Though everything that makes us unique and different and stand out in our own way *is* assuredly a gift from God, that we are at bottom the same creature, partaking in the same Creation, made in the same image of love and so given over to the same pains and sorrows and pleasures and joys of love--are given over to the same need to hope and to pray, to gather together for warmth and care and support as members of a community--*that* is more than a gift, it is the glory of the Lord itself. God appears before us when we work together, when we eat together, when we serve each other, when we love one another. Anything that comes between us and the simple fact of our essential unity, is coming between us all and the simple magnificence of God.

It is easy to just say these things. In our scripture reading this morning we find the Israelites crossing the wilderness, having been led by Moses out of Egypt. The great, oppressive force of Pharaoh and his army has been washed away by the Red Sea, which had opened to the Israelites by the still greater power of God's freedom. In our passage today, Moses and the people are experiencing tremendous hardship. They are so hungry that they begin to wonder if they weren't better off before, in chains, where at least they had something to eat. God's freedom opened the way to the freedom of the Israelites, awakening them to their right to freedom that was being denied. But even as freedom parts the waters, it does not set us beyond the wilderness. Freedom is a long road, with its own trials and pains. When they were enslaved, food came to the mouths of the Israelites in a steady trickle from their masters in Egypt--not in a generous spirit, not with love and hospitality and kinship, but to keep the bodies of the Israelites able and strong enough to work without end until their death. But now that they are free, that awful condition that they were in, that awful fate, becomes a temptation. The Israelites need to feed themselves now, they need to feed each other in a new way that they don't see yet. Moses, with God, has miraculously transformed their situation, but transformation is not the end of their struggles.

Somehow the election in November is not so far away anymore, and it seems every week there is a new development that reminds us of that fact. Our congregation is very civic-minded, and I trust that the vast majority of us will exercise our right, our freedom, to vote. Whoever we vote for and whoever wins the election, that freedom to vote will have been meaningfully protected by our use of it. But we must see by now, after this summer of protest

and after this year of deadly pandemic, that, regardless of the outcome of this election, more struggle lies ahead of us.

In this way we are again reminded that we are essentially the same even as our ancestors in faith attempting to cross a vast wilderness on our way to the Promised Land. Maybe it is easier to see this link if we think of the many individuals and families who seek out the Food Pantry in our Friendship Hall. According to our constitution, they are as free as you or I; as free as the ancient Israelites. But we know that the need for the Food Pantry has been with us for 30 years. By my count, in that span, we have had five very different Presidents, representing both of the major political parties. Certainly elections have consequences and will impact public policy. But when we focus very specifically on the need for supplemental or emergency food for our own congregants and neighbors, for our own communities right here in Western Mass, we must see that things have not changed as they should. We are as free as the Israelites bound for the Promised Land; and, many of us are as hungry as they were in the wilderness.

Thankfully, as a church, we are not in the business of partisan brinkmanship. We actually get to take a step back and survey the wilderness sprawled out before us. Even as we are grateful for our lives, for our joys, we nonetheless can pray candidly to God our complaints, our frustrations, and our hopes. In the church, we don't have to hedge or moderate ourselves. We actually have the responsibility to do the opposite, to keep on believing that we will get there, we will get to the Promised Land. (After all, if God's work ends at the mountaintop, if that is the end of God's responsibility to God's creation, then, like the Israelites we'd have to ask why take us out of the land of Egypt at all?) So here we are, like the Israelites, free but

struggling, faithful but hungry, determined but tired. God is the true power but God holds that power out to us graciously. It is not enough to merely endure or survive our freedom, with hunger pangs in our bellies.

We might ask, "How do we know that it is not enough?" All the world around us seems to say it is enough; for 30 years those with the power to end hunger have let it fester, have paid it little mind. But we are like the Israelites, and we bring our complaints now to a greater power. And we lay the prayers of the people at God's feet; our faith permits us that right. It was not enough for the Israelites to be barely fed by their captors in Egypt, and it is not enough to now go unfed in their freedom. God has not done what God has done for us, has not made us in the image of love, to abandon us.

In our scripture today, this is what is happening. The people are not betraying God in their complaining, they are not losing their way. Rather they are beginning to come to grips with the reality of their situation, and they are refusing to be content with the freedom to starve. God is moved. God recognizes that God's people have learned they deserve more than just to scrape by, but that they still must be taught a new way of being, a new way of organizing themselves into a new society.

To teach them, God rains bread by morning and stirs up quail at twilight. And more than this, God teaches the people that those who would gather more do not get more; those who gather less, do not get less. The bread of heaven is the bread we break off at our Communion Table: everyone is welcome, and everyone will get what they need. And God doesn't stop there. God also teaches the Israelites about the holy and solemn day of rest called the Sabbath. Because now that they are out of Egypt, now that they are struggling as one people in the

wilderness, now that they are on the road to the Promised Land, the awful law of slavery--that food was solely for function, for the requisite nutrition to work another day--is no longer in place. Now this faithful people live under the God who is love; God insists that food belongs to everyone, big and small, and food is not only to sponsor our hard work in the field or factory or office or classroom or at home, but it is also to guarantee rest and leisure for all. And crucially that rest should fall at the same time, so that communities of worship and fellowship can include everyone the same, and as a result flourish.

At Wednesday prayer, we held many heartbreaking prayers up to God. I don't recall that anyone prayed to be saved from hunger. But it is not hard to imagine that if anyone was going hungry that day, that prayer was silently on their heart. It is not hard to imagine that if you or I were going hungry, we would pray to end our suffering. Because for all our diversity, for all our unique joys and gifts that God has blessed us with, at bottom we all need bread and rest. At bottom we are all essentially the same, made in the image of God's love.

Alleluia and amen.