

# “Raining Bread from Heaven”

Exodus 16

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Reverend Will Willimon, chaplain of Duke University Chapel for many years, and today he is a bishop in the United Methodist Church. He has authored many books, *Resident Aliens* being one of my favorites, tells the story of a Northerner who was traveling through the South. On one particular morning, the traveler stopped for breakfast in a small rural community, at the local café. He ordered coffee, eggs, sausage, toast and juice. When his plate arrived, he noticed a pile of whitish-gray lumpy stuff in the corner of his plate. Confused, he flagged down the waitress and inquired what the “stuff” was.

“Why, sir”, she responded a bit puzzled that he didn’t know, “those are grits.”

“But I didn’t order them,” he informed her.

With a big smile, the waitress reassured him, “Sir, you don’t order grits. We won’t charge you for them. They just come.”

The good news of the biblical story is that we do not order God’s lavish, radical and unconditional provision and grace. They just come.

This morning we are continuing our journey with the Israelites as they travel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land to which God will guide them. Last week we heard, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Exodus, the story of how God calls Moses to be the spokesperson and trip guide for the Israelites as they escape Egypt. This morning we discover the Israelites, after their daring escape from the Pharaoh’s oppression and violence, wandering in the wilderness. Once in the wilderness they struggle to find water and food, they lose their sense of direction and they begin to whine and complain against God and God’s spokesperson, Moses. Isn’t it true of us fickle human beings that we are quick to praise God when things are going in our favor, but when confronted with hardship or struggle we begin to complain and “murmur” – the Hebrew word implying a constant droning of criticism.

Let’s listen to what happens once the Israelites flee Egypt and begin their wilderness wandering.

## Prayer for Understanding

Read Exodus 16, selected verses

When my children were young, we would always set aside a week or two during the summer for a family vacation, usually loading up our family minivan and traveling to the beach with grandparents. No sooner were we out of the driveway and down the street than a child from the backseat would ask, “how much longer till we get there?” Now this was pre video game and movie equipped van days so we had to try and engage in conversation, create a game to play or read while traveling. Eventually the whining from the backseat would intensify and then the fighting would commence. “Hey, hey, what is going on back there,” I would ask. Stephanie, the younger of our two children would whine, “Johnny just crossed the line.” “What line? I don’t see any line.” “This line”, Stephanie would point to an invisible line running through the middle of the back seat. “Stephanie, I don’t see that your brother is even touching you.” “Well, his feet are on my side.” A little further down the road and Johnny would erupt, “Stephanie, just stop it!” “Now what?” “Stephanie is looking out my window. Tell her to keep her eyes on her side of the car!” Of course, my children are mature adults now, and they don’t argue with each other anymore!

Imagine Moses traveling through the wilderness with, not just two people, but hundreds, maybe thousands of people for an entire generation – the Bible says 40 years. Forty years of walking all day in all kinds of weather, pitching a tent when the sun dips low in the sky, creating a camp fire and cooking supper for that crowd, only to rise and do it all over again in the morning. I can understand why the Israelites would get a little whiny and testy, complaining and fussing. Water and food back home in Egypt must have been longingly remembered as the Israelites thirsted and hungered in the sandy hot desert. Their memory was a bit selective, however. While their bellies might have been full in Egypt, the Egyptian taskmaster were cruel and oppressive. The promise of new life, communicated by God through Moses, seemed a far-off mirage. I tend to be a little critical of those fickle, ungrateful, whiny and unfaithful Israelites. People who quickly forget all that God has done on their behalf to get them out of Egypt. Faced with uncertainty, chaos, and suffering, how quickly they forget all of God's gifts to them.

The focus of this story, however, is not the murmurings of the Israelites. Our attention is drawn to the fact that God hears and responds to their cries. Protests are answered. Deliverance comes, not by being removed from the wilderness wandering. The wilderness is the place where a bonding occurs

between God and the Israelites. Suffering and chaos, fear and uncertainty, brings us to our knees in such a way that we recognize the power and blessings of God. Responding to the Israelites' cry for food, God spreads a table of manna for them in the arid sandbox. Death is transformed into life.

"Each day the people shall go out and gather enough manna for the day," God instructs Moses. One day's worth, no more, because manna would not keep. If the people try to hoard it, it spoiled overnight. In the morning it would stink and become full of worms. When the sun got hot, it melted. So, their limit was two quarts of manna per day per person. They were to gather only what they needed – perhaps learning the lesson of trusting God to provide for what was sufficient for life. This lasted 40 years – 14,600 days. Manna was the Israelites' food in the wilderness. They ate raw manna, boiled manna, baked manna, ground manna. It became the symbol of God's very physical, practical care for them. Manna enough for all. And it just came – like grits in the South.

James Mulholland has written a book entitled "Praying Like Jesus." He reminds us that when Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer, he instructs us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." *Us* and *Our*. Plural. Not just *my* daily bread. He goes on to say that if we were to shrink the world's population to 100 people,

with the ratios remaining the same, there would be 59 Asians, 15 Europeans, 9 South and Central Americans, 11 Africans, and 6 citizens of the United States. There would be 52 females and 48 males. Thirty people would be white and 70 would be people of color. 30 would be Christian and 70 would be of other religions. 30 would be able to read and 70 would not. Although Americans are only a small percentage of the world's population, we possess 59 percent of the world's wealth. If we have food in our refrigerators, clothes on our back, a roof over our heads, then we are already richer than 75 percent of the world. On our good days we count our blessings; on our best days, we share what we have. Too often we murmur and complain, like the Israelites, about what we do not have.

Today is World Communion Sunday. A day when we acknowledge our common humanity and faith in Jesus Christ. It began as an idea growing out of a conversation which the Shadyside Presbyterian Church's Session had as they discussed their upcoming Stewardship season, a conversation which took place in 1933. Wouldn't it be wonderful, they imagined together, if one Sunday a year Christian churches around the world would celebrate communion together, recognizing all that unites us instead of all that tears us apart and divides us. One Sunday when Christians around the world would witness, as they gathered around the Lord's Table, that God and Jesus Christ promise to always be with us,

sustaining us and providing for us. Now remember that during the 1930's this country was recovering from the Great Depression, one world war had been resolved but another was looming on the horizon, families were struggling. In the mist of division and suffering, violence and hatred, poverty and oppression, it was the belief of the members of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church that the church of Jesus Christ needs to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ – a message of hope, peace, love, compassion, and generosity – more than ever. As so it is today, as we gather nearly a century later to celebrate the Lord's Supper with Christians around the world. No matter what wilderness we are called to journey through, God promises to journey with us, hearing and responding to our cries, and providing for what we need to be sustained. And we are called to share God's gifts, not hoard them only for ourselves, we are called to remember that we are all part of a family journeying together. Perhaps we need to pause our murmuring and remember to give thanks to God for God's sustaining blessings and give thanks for our traveling companions – brothers and sisters in faith.