

Gift of Manna – Food for the Journey

Cycle # 1 – Session #5

Gift of Manna – Food for the Journey

Text: Exodus 16

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle – The Hebrew people were constantly reminded of God's presence by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. In lighting this candle we are reminded of God's presence with us as we gather here.

Song: – All Who Hunger Gather Gladly -- #419 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

We know that we don't live by bread alone.

And yet, we also know we need bread.

When we are truly hungry and there is no bread we suffer.

If we go without food too long we starve.

If we have food that fills, but not nourish we grow weak and die.

When your people were in the wilderness and they grew hungry you gave them bread.

The bread was not ordinary bread.

It was the meat of quail which came from the sky.

It was a substance unknown, Manna, which lasted only until the sun rose high in the sky.

They were fed, they were nourished, they continued their journey.

We gather in this place at this time, not because we lack food for our tables or our cupboards are empty.

We come because our hearts are empty and our souls need the bread which comes from you.

Fill our hearts, our minds, our lives with your presence

And nourish us in the abundance of your love.

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another, what nourishes your spirit when you feel empty.

Cycle # 1 – Session #5

Scripture

Exodus 16

Manna and Quail

1 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" 8 Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."

9 Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.' "

10 While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

11 The LORD said to Moses, 12 "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.' "

13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. 16 This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer ^[a] for each person you have in your tent.' "

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

19 Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning."

20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

21 Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. 22 On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers ^[b] for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. 23 He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.' "

24 So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. 25 "Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. 26 Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any."

27 Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. 28 Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you ^[c] refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? 29 Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." 30 So the people rested on the seventh day.

31 The people of Israel called the bread manna. ^[d] It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. 32 Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt.' "

33 So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be kept for the generations to come."

34 As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna in front of the Testimony, that it might be kept. 35 The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

36 (An omer is one tenth of an ephah.)

Footnotes:

- a. [Exodus 16:16](#) That is, probably about 2 quarts (about 2 liters also in verses 18, 32, 33 and 36)
- b. [Exodus 16:22](#) That is, probably about 4 quarts (about 4.5 liters)
- c. [Exodus 16:28](#) The Hebrew is plural.
- d. [Exodus 16:31](#) *Manna* means *What is it?* (see verse 15).

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading – Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard. Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading – Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text Exodus 16

When everything around you changes, how do you know who you are? How do you stay grounded? One way for many of us is through the retelling of our stories or the stories of our people, or the stories of our faith, or sometimes it is in all three. You don't have to look very far to realize the people who were in this story aren't the people for whom the story has been written down. The readers may have had some familiarity with the original story, but perhaps they hadn't listened very carefully or perhaps there just hadn't been a need for the story when they first heard it. In their present circumstance the story has become important and the writer/compiler is filling in the holes so they will understand not only the journey of their ancestors, but their own life journey. This unknown writer is aware his audience won't know what an *omer* is, so he has to tell them – one tenth of an *ephah*. Eugene Peterson suggests the amount was about 2 quarts. For us the exact measure isn't important. What is important is they were to gather neither too much nor too little, but enough for each day.

Sometimes the best way to understand the present is to look at the past. Since the writer/compiler of this story was putting it together years after the events, what made the story so compelling and why does it continue to be so? At the time it was being put into its present form the Israelite people had been in Exile long enough they had learned to live there. I suspect that wasn't unlike their ancestors having to live in Egypt after they were forced into slavery. There were some aspects of the Exile which for some of them at least had become comfortable. Then one day they faced the reality of a return to the Promised Land. Returning from Exile must have seemed like another wilderness time. The certainty of their lives was disrupted and the future must have looked even more uncertain. While they had dreamed of and longed for "home" and a return to the Promised Land, they had built homes and were established in Babylon. Chances are the people back in the Promised Land had learned to live without them and taken over the land and businesses they'd left behind.

Their old story can help them in this new wilderness time. It will remind them of who they are, God's people. It assures them God was with their ancestors and will be with them. It is also a reminder that just as their ancestors had to let go of Egypt in order to be truly free, they will have to let go of Babylon in order to be free. This leads us to our present. Where are we bound? If we are to leave captivity how will we live in the wilderness? What do we have to turn loose of before we can live in the Promised Land?

Sometimes the word *wilderness* is described as desert which doesn't quite fit. I suspect it may have been a lot like what in India people referred to as "*Jungle*," not the lush growth of a tropical rainforest, but the scrubby growth of shrubs and other vegetation. Boulders and rocky terrain made the going difficult there and without some guide for getting from one place to another it would have been difficult to know exactly where one was. The vegetation would at best have sustained sheep or goats if they were moved from place to place often.

There may have been an occasional tree large enough to provide a little shade and there may have been some places close to water where a few trees grew. Mostly it was a hard land. If I were to compare it to any place I've seen in the states, it would be the Nebraska Sandhills or maybe parts of Colorado, Wyoming, or Montana. It certainly wouldn't have seemed an ideal place to take a large group of people for an extended campout.

The important thing to recognize about wilderness is that it's untamed and untamable. It can't be controlled. The old rules of life in Egypt don't apply and life becomes chaotic. Wilderness is not geographic, it is also a state of being. The Israelites' sojourn in the Wilderness of Sin was a difficult time. Their struggle offers clues for how to live in wilderness times, which can happen anywhere, anytime, to any of us.

As we read this story we watch a people learn to turn loose of the past, drop the baggage of oppression and slavery and rediscover themselves to be the people of God, the God of their Fathers (and Mothers). In the wilderness they had to learn new skills. There was no call for bricklayers or servants. Not only were their old skills obsolete they actually may have been a hindrance. Learning to find water and recognize food was much more important than how good your bricks were. In Egypt they had known what to do, how to behave, even undoubtedly how to outwit the masters. Remember the midwives who were supposed to kill the boy babies, but could never arrive in time for the births? Now the old patterns were gone and they had to learn how to relate to God and each other in new ways.

In some ways this national saga repeats on a much larger scale the journey Moses has already made. He was born in slavery and then freed, at least in a manner of speaking, by his adoption into Pharaoh's family. He lived between cultures. From his mother who cared for him he learned the ways of his people and from his years in Pharaoh's court he would have learned the language and culture of the oppressors. When he saw the condition of his people he was awakened. He responded in anger, committed a crime which made him an outcast and escaped into the wilderness. In the years after leaving Egypt and living in the wilderness he became the person who had the knowledge, the skills, and the maturity to lead the people out of Egypt. Just as the Israelites had to learn new skills in the wilderness, so did he.

The same thing had happened when the Israelites were taken into Exile and a new wilderness time would accompany their return from Exile. Perhaps what is happening in our own lives, the life of our congregations and even of our church as we struggle to move from where we've been to where we believe God is calling isn't so different.

Observation

At the very beginning of this chapter we are given some important information. It has been about six weeks since the Israelites left Egypt. In the first days of their trek there had been a certain amount of excitement and newness. They were chased by the Egyptian Army, an army which had floundered without catching them. They had brought food with them and were probably not too uncomfortable in those first days. And then reality begins to set in. Not everyone likes going on a campout and to do it day after day, week after week is tough. They realize they can't go back and they don't know what lies ahead.

Consider

When you make a change, even one you know is a good one, at what point does the resistance begin to climb? When do you begin to long to go back to the way things were?

Observation

Several things may happen in times of high anxiety. Often the anxious present makes the past look better than it really was. Conflict increases and people want someone or something to blame for their present predicament. In this story the anxiety begins to climb as the food and water run low and the people don't see a clear path ahead by which they can travel easily and quickly from Egypt to the Promised Land and they begin to be anxious and afraid. Life in Egypt doesn't seem so bad, in fact it begins to look pretty good. They had all the bread and meat they wanted every day. So what if they had to work very hard from sunrise to sunset and had few rights? At least they were comfortable, at least relatively speaking. As anxiety climbs so does anger and that anger begins to focus on their leaders.

Consider

If you've had the experience of having to leave one place behind and go to another or if you've had to deal with major changes in your own life, you have more than likely experienced those times as "*being in the wilderness.*" What was isn't and what will be is uncertain. How did you respond to those times? What has helped you through?

Observation

While the people focus on Moses and Aaron as their leaders Moses tells them they're really blaming God for their predicament. In many First Testament stories God seems to react in anger, but not in this one. God hears the complaints and provides what they need and in fact a little more than enough. They are to have enough bread to last through their whole journey, until they no longer need it. Of course the bread they receive isn't exactly what was familiar. If you've had the experience of living in a foreign country and having to develop a taste for the foods there, that is often one of the more difficult tasks. Nothing tastes quite right and a little of some things goes a long way. People adapt, but often not easily.

Consider

They greet the bread with the question, "What is it?" Does it just appear the morning after this scene or was the bread there all along and they only recognize it after they are told it will be there?

Observation

Perhaps behind this account lies an answer to a question the people may not have consciously asked. How powerful is this God who has called us into the desert? Is God more powerful than Pharaoh? If God can provide for these people out of a wilderness where it at first appears there is only scarcity and can do so without resorting to the methods Pharaoh used, isn't God more powerful and worth following?

On the other side it appears God may also have had a question about the Israelites. They have been led out of Egypt, but the question remains whether they can leave Egypt behind and become a new people who will follow and trust God who has called them out. In this story they receive a powerful lesson, but the answer to that question still remains open.

Consider

Didn't the people in the Exile face the same question about God? Could they discover God where they were? Was God strong enough to be with them or had God been a local God left behind when they were driven into Exile? Could God provide for them even in their Exile? And isn't this the same question we face now? How strong is God? Have we become so engrained in our culture and dependent on the ways of our culture we no longer know whether or not we can trust God? If we are going to trust God, what is it we need? If God answers our need will we recognize the answer?

Observation

In this passage God gives the people several very great gifts. First, there is the bread and meat they need to sustain them. Second, the bread is given every single day and is enough to sustain them. Third, greediness and scarcity lose their power. Those who are greedy are left with bad smelling rotten food from the day before, except for Sunday. And those who don't gather quite enough find they still have as much as they need. Fourth, is the gift of Sabbath, a gift which will transform the Israelites by reminding them all that they have and are comes ultimately from God.

They are given rest and allowed to depend on something beyond themselves.

Consider

One, do any of these gifts resonate for you? What is your source of bread? How much is enough? Do you believe there will be enough? Do you think you'd better get more of whatever gives you a sense of security?

Spend some time reflecting on Sabbath. If you were to take Sabbath seriously how would it affect your life? If we in the church were to take it seriously how would it affect our behavior? Would anything change?

What does this story say to you about transformation in your context? Is this a story only about there and then or is it about here and now?

Activity (Optional)

One form of nourishment for the soul is a word of encouragement. Think of people in your congregation who may be in need of such a word. Take a few moments and write a note to one of them.

Practicing the Presence

1) Through the week become aware of God's abundance and look for ways to share that abundance with others. You might want to contribute canned goods to a local food pantry or take a loaf of bread to someone or share a meal with a friend. Sometimes the way of prayer is in the doing and not just in the words.

2) This week's scripture passage is Exodus 18. In addition to reading the scripture, you may also want to read the Midrash.

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Meditation

Stories abound of people being fed where there is seemingly no food but the gift of manna was unique. I suspect the Israelites in the wilderness had actually been surrounded by food from the beginning. They just didn't recognize it for what it was. They were used to the familiar food of Egypt. It had been good food. It was also the food of slavery, never eaten in freedom. There in the wilderness they had to learn to recognize what they saw and realize that while it was abundant and would nourish them, it wouldn't always be available. They had to learn not only to eat new food, they had to learn to trust God's abundance and live by new rhythms.

When Elijah fled from Jezebel he went a day's journey into the wilderness where he laid down under a broom tree. When he woke, God's messenger was there and gave him food and drink so that we would have strength for the journey that lay ahead ... a journey of 40 days and 40 nights which led him to Mount Horeb where he encountered God.

After Jesus was baptized he went to the wilderness where he spent 40 days and 40 nights. When he faced the temptation of turning stones into bread, he reminded the tempter, “One does not live by bread alone.” It was not physical food, but spiritual food which he sought.

When the crowds followed Jesus far into the wilderness and stayed so long they were hungry, Jesus told his Disciples to feed them. But the Disciples had little money and no food. How could they hope to feed such a large crowd. There was a generous child who shared his lunch. Did those few loaves and fishes multiply by magic or did his generosity

spur others to pull out what little they had and share it? If so, it must have fed both their bodies and their souls.

Break bread and by itself
 it spreads ...
 divides and scatters
On the plate becomes
 on checkered cloth
 or fine linen
 crumbs
Feast for robins
 or the least sparrow
 And so with love proffered
By smallest gesture,
 smile or touch
Its certain sun
 warms the chilled heart
Looses from loneliness
 Makes joy from sorrow
 Bread and love interlace,
 Shaping the essence
 Of grace.

Gladys McKee Iker, Sharing One Bread, Sharing One Mission, WCC Mission Series

Blessing of the bread (unison)

Blessed are you, O God,
Who brings forth the bread of transformation
From the earth.
As the baking of bread
Begins with gathering the wheat,
So our transformation begins
With gathering our selves
With one another
With prayer
Elemental offerings,
We give our selves to you,
Earth and fire and air and water
In these flesh and bones,
Shaped by your hand,
We rise,
We glow.
Bless to us
This circle-shaped loaf,
That it may sustain
Our continual unfolding.

Jan L. Richardson, Sacred Journeys, p. 196

Prayer – Notice who is on your right and who is on your left. During the coming week remember these two persons in your prayers. During the week give thanks for God’s abundance and all the ways you are nourished. Offer nourishment to others.

Blessing – Passing of the peace and saying to one another. *The Peace of Christ be with you* and responding *And also with you*.

Response (sing or say #450 Chalice Hymnal)

Go in peace and the peace of God be with you always.

Go in peace and the peace of God be with you always.

Celebrate and share the joy. Celebrate new life.

Go in Peace and the peace of God be with you always.

Song: (optional) Lo I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal