

Mo Blessings Mo Problems Sermon Series  
Daily Bread and Whine - Exodus 16:2-15  
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When we last left Moses, he was leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, away from their time of slavery in Egypt and into an unknown future with God. Our scripture today is one of the first stories that takes place as the Israelites begin their march to the Promised Land. Let's listen...(READ SCRIPTURE).

Ah, road trips! When I lived in the Chicago area, several times a year we'd pack up the car with our two girls, all the suitcases, toys, snacks, and pillows and make the six-hour drive through the Windy City – that part felt like six hours itself – and down the entire length of the state of Indiana – that felt like six days – to see our family in Jeffersonville. And inevitably, about a half-hour into the trip, it would start: “Are we there yet? I'm hungry. I have to go to the bathroom.” I'm sure my family got tired of hearing me complain like that. And I'm equally sure that Moses got tired of hearing the Israelites doing the same thing on their journey together. The group is only about a month removed from their miraculous trip through the Red Sea, but they are already starting to grumble against God.

Are you familiar with the term “hangry”? It's a combination of hungry and angry. When I've gone too long without food, my mood turns from hungry to hangry. Well, the Israelites are hangry. Hangry at Moses, hangry at God, hangry at their situation. Their complaining is not the deep, soul-searching laments that we find in the psalms. There is such a thing as complaining because of your faith in God. “God, I love you, why don't you do something?” But the Israelites' complaining shows a lack of faith in God. They are, to use a theological term, little bitty baby whiners.

As a pastor, I've dealt with my share of grumbling – not from any of you, of course! – so I know a bit how Moses feels. So imagine my glee when I read the line in which God says, “I've heard your grumbling, and I'm going to rain...” Yes God! What are you going to rain on these hangry grumblers? Fireballs? Big boulders? Cicadas? No! God says, “I'm going to rain bread from heaven for you.” Say what? And then I find myself grumbling, “You're going to actually give the grumblers what they want?” The God of the Hebrew scriptures gets a bad rap for being violent and vengeful, but it's important we remember that God continually shows this kind of grace and mercy, too.

To understand why God responds this way to the Israelites, it's important to understand the nature of their relationship at this juncture in the story. We made the point last week that when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, it marked the beginning of a new chapter in their existence. Because they've been in slavery for 400 years, they've lost their connection to God. They very possibly have no knowledge of who God is, and I believe God is also relearning who they are. So as they make their way into the wilderness, God and the Israelites are getting to know each other all over again.

In our passage today, God and the Israelites are basically on a date. They are getting to know each other, feeling each other out, figuring out what they like and don't like. More importantly, God is learning about the Israelites' ability to be faithful. Will they be the people God created them to be? Will they be steadfast in their faithfulness and strong in their obedience? Will they be grateful and honorable and loyal? Well, the short answer is “No.” But God doesn't know that yet.

So God tests the Israelites by responding to their plea for food, but giving very specific instructions that go along with it. God provides a daily ration of sustenance for the Israelites in the form of manna. Now, we're not exactly sure what manna is. The name itself actually comes from the Hebrew phrase "man hu," which literally translates into "What is it?" The prevailing theory is that the manna is actually bug juice. An insect native to this region of the world feeds on local tree bark and secretes a yellowish-white ball of juice that is rich in carbs and sugars. The ball hardens overnight into a small flake that decays quickly, lasting only about a day. So manna could very well be hardened bug secretions. Coming soon to our next church potluck!

Every day the Israelites were to go out and get their daily share of manna, except on the day before the Sabbath, when they were supposed to get two days' worth so they could rest the next day. If they gathered too much, it would go rotten. If they tried to gather on the Sabbath, it wouldn't be there. In this way, God tests the Israelites' ability to follow instructions, to be faithful in their obedience to God. Guess what? They didn't do so well. Oh, Israelites!

But do we do any better? I would like to think that grumbling against God stopped when the Israelites finally reached the Promised Land, but I know better. Today, we continue the rich tradition of complaining to God, which proves two things: our own stubbornness and God's infinite patience with us. My one-sentence explanation of the Bible is the story of God's faithfulness in the face of humanity's disobedience. Check it out, from Adam and Eve to Jesus, it tracks. Even after God gave us the true bread from Heaven in the form of Jesus Christ, we still find things to grumble about.

Why do we grumble? If we're honest, it's because we don't get our way. We grumble when our comfort is disrupted. We grumble when our entitlement is threatened or when someone else gets something we want. We grumble when things do go according to our plan, when life is life. "God, you were supposed to heal me. God, this job was supposed to be better. God, our children were never supposed to get in any trouble. God I want you to act now!" Are we there yet? I'm hangry! We've heard the Israelites' complaints come out of our own mouths.

One commentator calls this grumbling "selective forgetting." The Israelites selectively forgot that God had delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh and only chose to listen to their grumbling stomachs. They actually say, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread." Like the Egyptians were serving filet mignon to their captives. How often do we forget what God has done for us in the past and instead only focus on our present circumstances? We pray for the miracle we want, forgetting that God doesn't always provide what we want, but God does always provide what we need. And yet, when we don't get what we pray for, we think God isn't listening or, worse yet, God isn't there. Meanwhile, we're missing all the other things God has done and is doing for us – things like bug juice, or a compassionate friend, or moment of rest in a busy day, or a piece of bread and a cup of juice – grape juice!

God does indeed provide for us, but maybe not in the way we expect. For the Israelites, God only provided what they needed for each day, nothing more. That accomplished two things. First, it required the Israelites to be dependent on God's provision. Each day they were reminded that they needed God to survive. And second, it put everyone on the same level. No one would have more than anyone else. The local bigwig couldn't invite people over to show off his manna collection. Each day, everyone was equal.

That's one of the things we learned from the pandemic. No one was exempt from getting sick. Remember when one of the first big cases of Covid was Tom Hanks? That's when I sat up and took notice. "Wait, Forrest Gump may die from this?" I remember reading one day that the

latest celebrity to get Covid was Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. Look if a dude like the Rock could get Covid, none of us were safe! In many ways, the pandemic put us all on equal ground, connecting us at our most human, most vulnerable level.

I wish that lesson would have stuck, but it didn’t, did it? That’s what concerns me most about the future of humanity. We forget that, underneath all the bells and whistles and accoutrements and wealth and skin color and sexual orientation, we are all the same. Period. Full stop. And we all need the same things to survive. What does it say about us that some people build up several lifetimes of manna while others go hungry every day? Because we selectively forget God’s provision, because we don’t believe God will be as good to us tomorrow as God is to us today, we eat way more than a day’s ration. I firmly believe there is enough food produced by God’s creation to feed every person on earth with plenty left over. When it comes to modern-day manna, we don’t have a production problem, we have a distribution problem. Like toilet paper in a pandemic, some people gather enough for the next hundred years and leave others to fend for themselves. And then we grumble when the security we have built for ourselves melts away like manna as our bodies age and our world changes.

The risk we have in building up a stockpile of manna is that we will come to rely on what we have accumulated rather than on the God who has provided it for us. We’ll come to think that we’ve earned all that manna we’ve collected and we’re not under any obligation to share it with someone whose plate is empty and whose stomach is grumbling. For many of us, we’ve never known a day without bread, and so there’s no urgency in our dependence on God. It’s good to know God is there when we need to send up a prayer, but otherwise we’ve got things covered.

But this story reminds us that each day, we need to rely on God. Each day, we need to talk to God. Each day, we need to ask God what God wants us to do to share our abundance. It could be as simple as bringing in food for our Blessing Box or as challenging as committing our time and resources to changing the systems that leave people hungry in the first place. But make no mistake about it: each day, we are called to do something to provide manna for someone else who doesn’t have the same access or resources we do.

The Israelites’ grumbling won’t stop with this story. It will continue on for 40 years, until they reach the Promised Land. What about our grumbling? Will it continue on, or will it stop today? We have the choice to replace our grumbling with gratitude, being thankful for all that God has provided, selectively remembering that we have what we have because of God’s goodness. Every good thing you have today comes from God. And everything good thing you have tomorrow will come from God, too. Our challenge is to remember each day to thank God for our daily bread, and then to go into the world and share it.