

Hope in the Wilderness sermon series
Manna in the Desert
Exodus 16:2-15
September 6, 2020

We continue our sermon series this morning called “Hope in the Wilderness,” in which we are looking at some of the folks in the Bible who spent time in the wilderness. Our goal is to learn from them how they not only survived but stayed faithful, so that when we go through our own wilderness times, which may be the current spiritual location for some of us, we can know that there is indeed reason to have hope.

This morning, we are going to spend some time again with Moses. A few weeks ago, we witnessed him turning aside for the burning bush. Now, he’s answered the call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Next stop: the Promised Land! But because the Israelites are, to use a technical term, hard-headed whiners, this road trip through the wilderness is going to take a little longer than usual.

Ah, road trips! When we lived in the Chicago area, several times a year we’d pack up the car with suitcases, toys, snacks, and pillows and make the six-hour drive through the Windy City and down the entire length of the state of Indiana 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 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 the kind of angry you get when you’re really hungry. When I’ve gone too long without food, which is usually just a few minutes, 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 even though God has led them out of slavery and through the wilderness, the Israelites complain because of a lack of faith in God.

As a pastor and a parent, I’ve dealt with my share of grumbling, 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? Giant boulders? Telemarketing calls? 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 Old Testament gets a bad rap for being violent and vengeful, but it’s important we remember God shows grace and mercy here, too.

I can’t say that I completely blame the Israelites for their grumbling. Remember, they’ve been enslaved for 400 years, and now are wandering in the wilderness with very little provisions. And to top it off, their leader is asking them to trust in an unseen God. In a sense, the Israelites are just beginning their relationship with God. 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? It's easy to trust God when things are good, but can they trust God in the midst of the wilderness? 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 gives very specific instructions that go along with it. God provides a daily ration of bread for the Israelites in the form of manna. 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 juice hardens but also decays quickly, lasting only about a day. So manna could very well be hardened bug secretions. Coming soon to the 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, to trust God daily in the midst of the wilderness. They didn't do so well.

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. Even after God gave us the true bread from Heaven in the form of Jesus Christ, we still find things to grumble about.

Why? Why do we grumble? If we're honest, it's because things don't go the way we should. We grumble when our comfort is disrupted. We grumble when we lose control. We grumble when things do go according to our plan. "God, you were supposed to heal me. God, this job was supposed to be better. God I want you to act now!" Are we there yet? I'm hungry! 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. 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 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 aspects of this pandemic I find fascinating. No one is exempt from COVID. I read yesterday that actor Dwayne Johnson, better known as "The Rock," tested positive for COVID. Look, if a former professional wrestler named "The Rock" can get COVID, none of us are safe! The wilderness can be a great equalizer. We can't buy our way out of it.

And yet, that doesn't stop us from selectively forgetting. What does it say about us that we seek to build up a lifetime 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 and spend and mortgage way more than a day's ration. We don't just gather enough for today; we 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 is threatened.

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.

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 buying bread for a homeless person or as challenging as committing our time and resources to changing the systems that make people homeless in the first place. But make no mistake about it: each day, even in our own wilderness, we are called to do something to provide manna for someone.

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 can 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.