Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost

August 1, 2021

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Just a few weeks after they’d been liberated from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites discovered that the wilderness is not exactly a great place to find food or water.

It’s easy to judge them for being ungrateful. After all, God *had* delivered them out of slavery. Rescued them from a system that oppressed them and piled more and more demands upon them. And punished them harshly when they failed to meet those demands.

But their initial excitement and gratitude began to fade as the reality of life on their journey through the wilderness set in. Food and water were scarce.

And so they complained. But this isn’t just some small complaints. Not just a little whining. They were becoming rebellious.

“God should have just put us to death while we were in Egypt,” they declared. “We had plenty of food while we were in Egypt. But now we’re going to starve out here in the wilderness.”

How quickly they forget what God had done for them. Or, perhaps more to the point, how quickly they forget how bad it was in Egypt. And forget what God was leading them *to*.

And yet, God does not chastise them for complaining. Instead, God says, “I’ll take care of you, I’ll feed you, but you’ll need to trust me in the process.”

But before God feeds them, God’s glory is made manifest, shining ahead of them in the wilderness. And as they traveled in the wilderness, God’s glory continued to be made manifest, in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

God provided for them, and they learned how to become a community that relied on God for what they needed when they couldn’t provide for themselves. When they reached the Promised Land and settled in a place where they could more easily find food, only then did God stop providing for them in such an obvious way.

But that hardly means God had stopped providing for them.

God gave them the talents they needed and abundance from the land and sea. And the instruction to rest on the Sabbath so that they would remember they needed to trust that what God provided for them was sufficient.

God provided for the basic needs of the Israelites. But God was also calling them to something deeper. By learning to trust in God, they could have their deepest needs met. They could know a life without the anxiety that comes with wondering where your next meal comes from. They could know the peace that God intended for them as a community. They could know what it meant for God when God declared, “I will be your God and you shall be my people,” and grow into that relationship.

They could know wholeness.

Many years later, Jesus provided a meal for people in the wilderness. The next day, hopeful for another meal, the people looked for Jesus.

The people had a real need. Most of them had probably never had as filling of a meal as they had the day before. And they knew there were leftovers, 12 baskets full. If Jesus was the prophet that had been promised them by Moses, then surely he would be able to continue to provide the food they needed.

But Jesus tells them they’re only looking for him because he met their most immediate need — feeding them. They missed what feeding them *meant*. They missed the sign it pointed to: that God’s presence was among them. That they had witnessed God’s glory *in their midst*. And that it was through Jesus himself.

Like the Israelites, they were focused on their immediate needs being met. But God was not just meeting those immediate needs. Jesus was calling them to something deeper. Jesus was calling them to be aware that God was in their midst, and to consider the implications of that.

Jesus was inviting them to focus on, as Paul says, on heavenly things, not earthly things.[[1]](#footnote-1)

That doesn’t mean that our most basic needs of food, shelter, and security aren’t important. Jesus *did* feed them. God *did* feed the Israelites.

It means that when we get too caught up in earthly things, it’s hard for us to tend to our deeper, spiritual needs. And it’s easy to forget how God has provided for us in the past, and hard to notice how God is present with us now.

Just as our lives can be filled with anxiety about our daily needs, so too can the church. It’s easy for a congregation to dwell on a romanticized version of the past, rather than look for the new thing that God is leading them to in the present. Rather than see the ways God is providing for them in new ways, perhaps leading them to new ventures.

We gather here because, ultimately, we are looking for something deeper than what the world offers us. We are looking for a connection to God, for a deeper relationship with our Creator.

Like the Israelites, we may be tempted to look back and get stuck in our imperfect memories of how things used to be. After troubles are past, it’s all too easy to forget how challenging they were.

There is no doubt in my mind that things will be different for this congregation in the future. It’s too early for us to fully know how the pandemic is going to change us, as individuals or as a community of faith.

But I’ve heard from *so many people* that this past 16 months has upended how they look at their lives. They’re realizing that they need something deeper, more lasting, than the earthly things they set their minds on and ordered their lives around.

They’re seeking wholeheartedness. Just as Martin Luther King reminded us that no one is free until *all* are free, we can only know wholeheartedness when what causes the brokenness of people’s lives is fixed.

We look to God to heal the brokenness of our lives, to provide for our deeper needs.

Because Jesus as the Bread of Life is about pulling us into a deeper relationship with God, trusting that God provides for what we need. Trusting that we are *enough* and *loved* by the author of all of creation.

Jesus says that what’s asked of us is to *believe*. To place our trust in God. To place our trust in the notion that not only is there nothing we can do that will make God stop loving us, there’s nothing we can do that will make God love us more. To trust that grace is a gift we are invited to receive, and to give up the burden we continue to bear that tells us we need to do something to earn our way into eternal life with God.

And when we have that kind of trust in God, then we can begin to let go of the earthly things that hold us back from becoming who we were created to be.

May it be so for us.

1. Colossians 3:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)