

KNOWING HISTORY

Exodus 16:1-5, 10-15

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on September 24, 2017, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.'

...

And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God."'

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.'

I.

Many of us have been watching – or recording for future viewing – the eighteen hour documentary on PBS entitled *The Vietnam War*.¹ Because I was a child and teenager during most of the years encompassed by that effort, I am watching as many of the episodes as I am able. They have helped fill gaps in my knowledge and connect individual episodes with which I was somewhat aware with the larger whole in which they occurred. The series is helping me learn more about our nation's history.

At the same time, we have for several years been debating the purpose and appropriateness of monuments – particularly those that commemorate Confederate military and political leaders as well as national leaders with roots in the slave economy or segregated South. These debates have become more intense, and some violent, in the past few months.

To be honest I have not paid much attention to these monuments or the debates about them in the past. But from reading accounts of protests and counter-protests, of deliberations in university board rooms and city council chambers, and of editorials pro and con, I have learned some things that I didn't know, despite that fact that I

¹ See <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/watch/>.

had an excellent exposure to history in high school, majored in it in college, and have read it as an interested amateur for the past forty years. Such knowledge, whenever we acquire it, is a good thing.

II.

In our text for today, the people of Israel have just crossed the Red Sea after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. Their crossing was violent and frightening, as we saw last week, ending with them emerging from the sea at daybreak to the sight of Egyptian chariots mired in mud and bodies of Egyptian soldiers slain on the seashore.² The sight humbled the Israelites, filled them with fear and respect for God, and silenced them into a respectful reverence. Afterward they broke into song.³

Once their celebration subsides, the Israelites leave the Red Sea and find themselves in desert wilderness. After three days they run out of water, as likely happened to any unfound survivors of the earthquake in Mexico City. The Israelites come upon water at Marah, but find it too bitter to drink. They complain against Moses. Moses cries out to the Lord, who directs Moses to a piece of wood to throw into the water, which, when Moses does, becomes sweet and drinkable for the Israelites.⁴

Two stops later, exactly one month after crossing the Red Sea,⁵ the Israelites come to the wilderness of Sin. The narrator tells us:

The *whole* congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron [his brother and co-leader]...

The Israelites say:

If only we had died
By the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,
When we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread;
For you [Moses and Aaron]
Have brought us out into this wilderness
To kill this *whole* assembly with hunger.

In many ways, this is a remarkable statement:

- The narrator presents it as a *unanimous* grievance: “the *whole* congregation complained...”
- The complaint expresses a memory of slavery whose accuracy we have a *hard time believing*: “Fleshpots” – which are cauldrons of meat⁶ – and “bread to the fill” are unlikely descriptions of the *actual conditions* under which the people of Israel lived during four hundred years of slavery. “...we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...” *Really?*

² Exodus 14.

³ Exodus 15.

⁴ Exodus 15:22-27.

⁵ According to *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated—New Revised Standard Version*, “They have travelled exactly one month (see 12:6, 17-18), and this is the seventh stop (see 12:37; 13:20; 14:9; 15:22, 23, 27) and the third complaint (see 14:11; 15:24).” (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 2006), Exodus 16:1n, page 111.

⁶ Robert Alter writes: “The Hebrew indicates something like a cauldron in which meat is cooked, but the King James Version rendering of ‘fleshpots’ (‘flesh’ of course meaning ‘meat’ in seventeenth-century English) has become proverbial...” *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 405.

Their complaint – as visceral and guttural as it is – is real. Primal screams usually are. And while I feel somewhat like I am “blaming the victim” in critiquing them, it seems that their complaint about their past in slavery comes from such a place of pain that it leads in the present to whitewash their history and downplay the actual suffering they experienced as slaves. That is sometimes the case with people who have suffered abuse. What the Israelites seem to be really saying is: “At least in Egypt we would have died on a *full* stomach.”⁷

III.

It is fortunate that that in God’s long commitment to his people and to his promise of land, descendants, and blessing, God does not require the Israelites to earn Advanced Placement in history. Rather, God addresses Moses:

I am going to *rain* bread from heaven for you,
And *each day* the people shall go out
And gather *enough* for *that day*.

This is from a God who had been known to *rain* flood,⁸ fire,⁹ and plagues,¹⁰ but who is now about to *rain* bread from heaven. It is from this story that Jesus will later adopt the phrase “our daily bread,”¹¹ make it part of his prayer, part of our lives.

“Give us this day, our daily bread.”

“I am about to rain bread from heaven.”

After several more rounds of conversation, the narrator tells us:

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp;
And in the morning there was a layer of dew...
When the layer of dew lifted,
There on the surface of the wilderness
Was a *fine flaky substance*,
As *fine* as *frost* on the ground.

⁷ A look back at Exodus shows a more likely picture of the condition in which the people lived under slavery. The narrator had opened the book by saying “...a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Moses.” This new king – or Pharaoh – had feared a population explosion among the slaves and therefore had made their work “bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.” He was “ruthless in all the tasks” he had imposed on the Israelites. He had ordered the death of their infants so as to keep their population down. He had refused the entreaties of both God and Moses to “let [God’s] people go” to the point that his people – the Egyptians – had suffered plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, disease, boils, thunder, hail, darkness and the killing of their firstborn – an ancient version of international sanctions, implemented by God rather than the international diplomatic community. (See Exodus 1:8-22 and 7:14-12:32).

⁸ Genesis 6-7.

⁹ Genesis 18.

¹⁰ Exodus 9.

¹¹ Matthew 6:11.

IV.

Though God's response to the Israelites is generous, one line reveals that God dispenses neither an "Easy A" nor a "Gentleman's C." In raining bread from heaven, God says:

I will *test* them,
Whether they will follow
My *instruction* [my teaching, my Torah]¹²
Or not.

Robert Alter, a contemporary Jewish scholar writes:

The underlying conception of the deity in ancient Israel, Beginning with the Garden [of Eden] story,
Is of a God who offers humankind
A *great abundance of gifts*
But always stipulates *restrictions*
To be *observed* in their *enjoyment*.¹³

Avivah Zornberg comments that the way the Israelites respond to God's provision leads one to question whether they are truly "ready for redemption" God offers.¹⁴ The way their pain leads them to obscure their history is tragic. Yet if they continue to be overly *nostalgic*, to have *selective memory*, or to *ignore* the past in such a way that it continues to haunt them, they will suffer the consequences of an *unclear* mind, of a *cloudiness* about truth, of an *avoidance* of facts, past and present.

Though God showers them with an abundance of gifts, God expects a responsible stewarding of those gifts in return. "I will test them, whether they follow my instruction or not."

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Thus, on one level this story from the past reminds us that it is the task of any society – particularly a *democratic* society such as ours – to determine together how we use the *abundance* of gifts God provides and how we are to observe the *respectful restrictions* that accompany them.

- This is a function of our *politics*.
- This is a function of our *public ethics*.
- This is a function that our *faith* informs.
- This is why we must know *history*.
- This is why we must be involved in the *public square*.

We live with *abundance* and *limits*. The challenge before us is to find the *appropriate* – even *faithful* – *balance* between the two, both *personally* and as a *society*.

¹² *Harper Study Bible*, Exodus 16:4n.

¹³ Alter 406.

¹⁴ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 174.

V.

The narrator then says:

When the Israelites saw [the fine, flakey substance],
They said to one another,
'*What* is it?'
For they did not know *what* it was.

Moses [then] said to them,
'It is the *bread* that the Lord has given you to eat.'

**

On one level, this sounds like a happy ending to the story.

Slaves are freed.
They run out of food.
They cry out to God.
And God provides.
"It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat."

Though *happy*, the ending is not as *simple* as it at first seems.
Running throughout the story – including its ending – is the word "*What*."

"*What* are we that you complain against us?" Moses and Aaron say.

"*What* is it?" the Israelites ask when they see a fine, flakey substance on the ground.

"They did not know *what* it was," the narrator explains.

This may sound like a simple progression of events through the story, but there is a *subtle message* that emerges from the *root* of the Hebrew word we translate as *what*.

- *What* in Hebrew is *man hu*.
- From it we get the word *manna*.

The two times the narrator names the *fine, flakey substance* the the Lord has provided as *manna*, the word can just as easily be translated as *what*.

- "In the morning, you shall have your fill of *what*..."
- "It is the *what* that the Lord has given you."

This teaches us is that there is forever a *sense of mystery* surrounding God's provision:

- Is it *manna*?
- Is it *bread*?
- Is it *man hu*?
- *What is it?*¹⁵

Yet at the same time, there is *no mystery* about the *source* of that provision:

- It is *man hu* from heaven.
- It is *manna* from heaven.
- It is *bread* from heaven.
- *Whatever it is, it is* from heaven.

God's provision to us – personally and in history – is often hard to recognize, describe, name. But its source is clear: "*From heaven*."

VI.

We are awash in history these days:

- Fifty year anniversaries of everything that happened in the 1960s
- Debates over monuments and names
- Documentaries about a war fought long ago, a war we still seek to understand, a war whose differences among us we still seek to reconcile.

But the promise of this simple Biblical story – a promise at the heart of our faith – is that *in the midst of the history* we are living *God is living with us*. God provides. *Man hu. Manna. Bread. From heaven*.

God's provision also places a call upon us, a *responsibility to know our history, to know who we are, to know where we have been as a prelude to knowing where we will go*. Such knowledge – as difficult or painful as it often is – brings us *one step closer* to being *ready* for the provision God offers, *ready* for the redemption God provides, *ready* for the wilderness, the land, the Christ who will come and whisper our name on the seashore.

What is it?

Man hu

Manna

Bread.

It is from heaven.

Amen.

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¹⁵ Zornberg 211.