

HUNGRY IN THE DESERT, MISSING ALL THAT'S PAST

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 24, 2017

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30

When I was a kid growing up in Northwest Missouri, we would take occasional trips to Kansas City for certain occasions. One of them was the lighting of the Christmas tree on the Country Club Plaza sort of like our tree at Rockefeller Center except that all the buildings on the Plaza were outlined with lights so that not just the tree, but the buildings around it were festively decorated. Those trips were on a state road, before I-29 connected St. Joseph with Kansas City so it took at least two hours or more to make the trek.

I asked my iPhone what the distance between the two cities was and Siri said “56 miles or 48 miles as the crow flies.” “But I am not a crow,” I said in jest, and evidently, not getting the joke, Siri hung up on me. Artificial intelligence. Who needs it?

You can make that trip in an hour today, flying through the farmland that is there, but in those days, it took two or three hours.

My mother always packed a shoe box lined with waxed paper supplied with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for this long trip and, if we were good, brownies as well.

We were hardly out of the driveway in front of our house when I would ask whether I could have half a sandwich and some lemonade from the thermos. It was a long trip after all on country roads.

Kansas City seemed so big, such a tall destination, it was an adventure getting there and my mother wanted to make sure that she had enough supplies to keep the restless masses in the car occupied.

What parent is not always thinking ahead about the little one in the stroller, side pockets laden with fresh diapers, the envelope on the back bearing a cookie, a handful of cheerios, a binky, the necessary things for a trip to either Kansas City or to church on a Sunday morning. And for the older kids ...the backpack now with a ziplock bag of carrot sticks, a small container of apple slices, a cutting of grapes, seedless, of course. Variety overcomes boredom, and crying is staved off by an ample supply, a truth that leads us directly into the story of Israel after the crossing of the Red Sea, after they had been on the far side and traveling for a few days, still shell shocked perhaps from the memories of those Egyptian soldiers and the chariots sinking in the deluge that overwhelmed them. The soldiers' cries for help drowned by the flooding.

We have had a taste of this in recent days, this shell shock - seeing the suffering of so many catastrophes piled one on top of another. First, the flooding of Harvey in Texas, and then the waters of Irma, followed by the winds and waves of Maria, and all the smaller hurricanes in-between. Mexico shaking on its foundations, schools pancaking, and unthinkable loss of life all around.

It is enough to shell shock any faithful people, knock loose the props beneath us, make us wonder what God is doing in letting all this suffering happen.

I suppose some of that was on the minds of the Israelite wanderers as they followed Moses into the land that may have been *Promised*, but of which there was not much of a sign yet. There they were out in the desert sort of like the people who showed up that day to hear Jesus speak on the mountainside, and they didn't have enough food that day either. On that occasion, however, they had Jesus and he took a small number of loaves and a few fish and fed a multitude. Was it four thousand or was it five?

In any case, long after Israel was hungry in the desert, God fed God's people when Jesus multiplied the abundance of what they already had.

But in the exodus days, the hunger of the wilderness was getting to God's people. The young families had gone through all their cookie supply, no carrot sticks left in the plastic bags, the water bottles

drained dry, and they were wondering if maybe they had made a mistake following this wild-eyed Moses-fellow and his sidekick Aaron into a place where even their Egyptian captors could not come back to life and rescue them.

And as I mentioned last Sunday, they were having a lot of buyers' remorse. They whined and wailed about Moses and his so called Promised Land, and his dreams of milk and honey... and they also remembered kindly Pharaoh. You remember the nice man Pharaoh, so much nicer now that they were not working for him or his task masters?

In their revisionist minds they could almost smell the huge warming pots of lentil soup that ended their work day, and sometimes a hearty beef stew, or a nice bouillabaisse. And the hot ovens that the bakers used, and the long paddles with which they extracted that tasty challah bread, and sourdough sometimes, and pumpernickel too. And how they celebrated birthdays with big cakes and lots of candles and sweet wine. It was so good back in Egypt, remembered from the far bank of the wilderness, beyond the Red Sea where Moses and Aaron were to blame for the starvation that was setting in at the camp.

So Moses and Aaron sensing a slight chill in the air regarding the confidence of Israel took the murmurs and undercurrents to God and reported what they were hearing. An uprising in the making against Moses and Aaron, and what was God going to do about it?

So God, poor God, said "Here's the deal." Look to the sky. There will be a pillar of cloud before you and my presence will be there. At twilight, there will be meat. There will be quail for the people. And in the morning, bread. One day's supply only. And it will be a test of the people's obedience, and a testimony to my having heard them.

On the sixth day of each week there will be two days' supply so that no one labors on the Sabbath gathering bread... no work on that day... all rest. "And day by day there will be enough," God said. And Aaron was assigned to tell the people and they waited to see if it was so.

And there was morning and there was evening, and it was so. There was just one question. When the people saw the condensation on the grass, the sticky stuff that they would warm and eat, the bread God would supply, they had a one thing to say. "Manna?" they asked, which translated means, "What is it?"

"Bread," Moses said, this is God's bread. And they looked at one another and said, "Doesn't look like the loaves that we remember in Egypt, or any that we've ever seen before." "God's bread," said Moses. "So be thankful."

Terry Freitheim, the Old Testament scholar, has written,

[Manna] corresponds quite closely to a natural phenomenon in the Sinai Peninsula. A type of plant lice punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives, who bake it into a kind of bread (and still call it manna). The food decays quickly and attracts ants. Regarding the quails, migratory birds flying in from Africa or blown in from the Mediterranean are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.¹

Now whether you buy Freitheim's biological and all too scientific explanation or not, the feeding of God's people in the desert is a defining story of those whom God sustained by whatever particular means it occurred, and they were sustained, maybe not by three star Michelin Guide fare, but still kept nourished and fed in their sojourn to the Promised Land. It was not too much, but it was enough. Enough for God to make God's presence known and to remind the people Israel that it was by God's hand that they were being led and fed.

My colleague and friend Michael Lindvall at the Brick Church here in New York, writes about this delicate balance that God's people demonstrate. Lindvall writes,

Just as it romanticizes the past, our early 21st Century world is curiously pessimistic about the future. Our day has indeed been chided by the stunning human toll of 20th Century totalitarianisms, present environmental concerns, media that successfully bear global horrors once at a remove into our living rooms – and a regnant distrust of the ability of institutions and leaders to chart a future of promise...”²

And I would add that with the recent terrorist revivals, and whirling destruction on the Atlantic coasts and islands, with the name calling and insults of the President and Kim Jung Un, there is some reason to be pessimistic about the future, some reasonable cause to be worried that things could go wrong. A hydrogen bomb detonated in the Pacific? There’s a reason to be pessimistic!

Now some people would like to bury their head in the sand about all this and adopt a “fiddle dee dee” attitude like Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. I heard a person the other day say that he had read Steven Pinker’s book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature – Why Violence Has Declined*. And he was convinced by Pinker’s argument. Things in the human spirit are getting better. But I’m not sure I see that. I didn’t see it that day on 9/11 when we lost so many. I have not seen it in Charlottesville, nor in the assassination of Dr. King, nor in the beheadings of captives of Isis.

These last several nights I have been watching what my heart can tolerate of Ken Burn’s new PBS series on the Viet Nam War, and it makes me ill to remember having lived through those days, and to hear soldiers, “grunts,” marines, Viet Cong, soldiers on both sides describe how awful that war was in reality for those who fought it face to face, only a measurement of feet apart from one another, shooting and killing and grenading, and bayonetting one another as they did. One can hardly place those two perspectives side by side – on the one hand an image of humanity becoming less violent, more humane – set beside those images of war that have blotted and stained our human history from Cain and Abel, until now. No wonder we feel some measure of despair about the human condition.

But the flip side of romanticizing the past (or even the present) is becoming mired in pessimism about the future. And it’s to that that this story of Israel in the desert, hungry and missing all that’s past, addresses.

We often tend to see the past as either much worse than it was or more romanticized than it was in reality. It was often my worry as we celebrated our 300th anniversary of the church that part of the congregation would romanticize the church’s history as if it would have been better to have lived then, or to go back to that time – fifty or a hundred or three-hundred years ago.

There is no getting around the fact that the church was founded in historically significant days, that it has been the spiritual home of so many leaders of the American Revolution, that great preachers have stood in our pulpit like Jonathan Edwards, and Dr. Fosdick, and Charles Parkhurst. It worried me that we would make the past some sort of idol.

You know... *the church will never be as good as it was when we had those Thanksgiving dinners, or when we celebrated Maundy Thursday in the basement, or when Dr. Alexander was the pastor – so beloved that they named the chapel for him, and made the poor guy stay on in his dotage long after he had hoped to retire.*

People come back here and pause at the door on Sunday mornings as one couple did last Sunday and say things like “We were married here fifty years ago and just had to see it one more time.”

We romanticize the past but get stuck in it, or worse yet we become mired in pessimism. *We’ll never be as great as when we had that couples group, or when every kid went to camp on a scholarship, or when we founded that Settlement House program, or sponsored kids who went for a week in the summer’s fresh air.*

We get fixed on the decline of Protestantism and the move away from church and the changing priorities of families. We’re sure that somehow, time will pass us by as a church and we will starve for spiritual food, manna to sustain us, and a vision of a Promised Land not yet in sight.

The problem with pessimism is that it is so egocentric, as if this church and its people, and all this church's future were ours to determine and to decide.

We forget that we are in the desert on the far side of the sea, and that hungry as we are there is but one who can supply our every need.

It is God who holds the future in God's strong hands, and we need not take it upon ourselves to beat up on Moses, worried that we will starve to death, or wander so far afield that God cannot and will not sustain us on this journey. The point of the story of manna in the wilderness is that neither pessimism nor romanticism is useful to God. If we do not romanticize or become cynical about the future, we may discover that God will sustain us day by day, manna in the morning, and quail to help us through the night.

One of my favorite stories about Pope John XXIII, Angelo Roncalli, was that every night he would pray earnestly on his knees, lifting up the poor and grieving, the sick and friendless, the suffering and lonely. He prayed for the church, for the priests and nuns and schools and children that depended on his prayers. He prayed for the world, for peace, for the harmony of nations, for those who were living through despotic regimes and natural disasters.

He worried that the church might somehow fail in its charge, and he worried that perhaps he might have forgotten to lift up in prayer some concern that he should have in prayer.

And then he would rise from his knees and lay in bed and as he lay waiting for sleep he would continue to fret about the things about which he had prayed, until he said he often heard an inner voice saying to him "Angelo, whose church is it, anyway, yours or God's?"

"Go to sleep, Angelo. Go to sleep!"

My advice: Do not romanticize the past. It was never that good really, and the mind scrubs the harsh things away, which is both good and not so good. And do not be pessimistic either, about the church, about the world, about your life, about the future.

Jesus put it this way, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"³

Go to sleep, Angelo. Go to sleep!

¹ Terrence E. Freitheim, *Interpretation, Exodus*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 182.

² Michael Lindvall, Moveable Feast Paper on this text, 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2017 Moveable Feast paper, unpublished.

³ Matthew 6:27