

Bread From Above

Exodus 16:2-12

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady
Pastor

September, 2011

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

“Are we there yet?” What parent has not heard this question from a child in the back seat of the car shortly following departure for a vacation or perhaps a road trip to Grandma’s for Thanksgiving. “Are we there yet? How much longer?” Despite the carefully planned snacks, the DVDs and games, inevitably impatience, fatigue, and appetite combine to destroy contentment and things can dissolve quickly in the car. We used to drive to our cousins farm regularly - a three-hour drive that seemed like the Exodus after the first hour. “Don’t make me pull this car over or you will regret it!” I can still remember my dad yelling from the driver’s seat of our 1957 Plymouth station wagon.

The story of the Exodus is a story of life. In it we may come to find our own story reflected and then come understand ourselves better. The family (the twelve tribes) of the Israelites traveled for forty years on their way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of promise. As we recall their story, we remember that we too are on a spiritual journey toward freedom. The life of faith is a pilgrimage from the scarcity of our own way and the brutality of the world’s ways, to the abundance of God’s way. The problem is that we live “betwixt and between.” We live somewhere between hearing the promises of God and experiencing the fulfillment of those promises. We often find ourselves confronted with our own needs, facing scarcities of all kinds, and occasionally with unfulfilled appetites for something beyond our reach. We too may find ourselves surprised that this place where we live “in-between” promise and fulfillment is such a hungry place. We expected something different in life and something different from faith.

This morning we will ordain and install our elected leaders. Leading others is not easy these days. I suppose if Moses was here he might say, “It never has been!” When people get hungry and tired, allegiances can shift quickly.

Many years ago I led backpacking trips in the Beartooth Mountains near Red Lodge, Montana. For several summers during my college years, I spent the entire summer

leading groups of high school students up to Silver Run Plateau, one of the highest land shelves in the country. We began below 8,000 ft. and hiked up to 12,000 ft. The very first trip was scheduled to follow a trail up the switchbacks to the top of the pass, (high above the timberline) and then to depart from the trail. We climbed even higher through the snow to a peak, intending to descend down the other side and pick up another trail. It was much more difficult and much farther than I had understood. Then the weather conspired against me. The clouds moved in and with them snow and ice, taking away our visibility and any ability to identify landmarks. We had to rely entirely on the compass and the topographical map to get us off that mountain. More importantly, the group had to trust me. You should have heard the complaining! "I'm tired! Are you sure the trail is that way? When are we going to eat? Do you know where you're going? Let's just stop here for the night!" We were utterly exposed on that mountain and the thin fabric of leadership and group support was beginning to unravel – with lots of "murmuring" about the leader and the expedition itself. We finally found our way down that day, but I learned a lot about planning and leadership.

Moses' leadership was called into question too. It doesn't take very long in the story of the Exodus for the entire expedition to go off the trail. The people, who were only a few chapters back singing praises when they were miraculously rescued by God, used the same lips to then criticize and complain about how hungry they were and what poor planning their leaders had demonstrated. Their joy and relief quickly turned into self-pity. Their expectation of a better life was lost in the face of their own necessity. No longer were they guided by a grand vision of the future, to which the Lord was leading them. Rather, once again, they had fallen back into the grip of their own appetites and self-absorption. A food crisis turned into a faith crisis. Their memories of the past became idealized and they longed for the comforts of home.

It just seems to be easier to begin a new venture than it is to see it through. Starting takes one kind of courage but continuing takes another courage all its own. When the going gets tough on this wilderness journey, it's not really God who is tested. Like the Israelites, we show our true character when we are under pressure. Will we continue to be motivated by our highest beliefs and ideals or will we be driven by our needs and desires? Does faith direct us in the face of our own need or will we collapse into self-pity and complaint, refusing to trust in the Lord? It can be difficult to stay focused on the destination when you have sand in your eyes. In the words of one commentary,

for the people of God on the Exodus, "Faith is eroding with the sand dunes"¹ in the face of life's real challenges.

God meets their physical needs and does it in a way that is not all that supernatural. We may not "live by bread alone," but we still need bread to live, God knows. And even in the wilderness, bread is provided. They (and we) must learn to trust God not only for the big things in life but more importantly for the small, daily ones.

Some things just can't be stockpiled. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Some things come daily or not at all. Sleep is hard to stockpile. So is nourishment. Both are needed daily. I learned to trust in the Lord in one area of my life after discovering I couldn't stockpile any more than the Israelites could collect more manna than one day's provision.

Occasionally people will say to me, "I can't imagine having to write and preach a sermon every week." There may be some attractive elements of the ministry for those who see it from the outside but for many, weekly sermons are a frightening prospect. It is for me too! In accepting the call to be the pastor of this church, I was most anxious about having to preach every week. What would I say? To lessen my anxiety I was determined to be well-prepared. I planned to allow some transition time between my positions so I could re-tool, spend days in the library, and arrive on the west coast with several well-prepared and finely crafted sermons stockpiled in my folder but it didn't turn out that way. The very first day of my transition, a family crisis took me away for over a week. By the time I returned home, there was only enough time to pack for the move. I arrived in San Marino with not one sermon written. My prayer each week is – "give me this day, my daily bread! Provide me Lord with enough this week that I might feed the flock you have called me to lead."

During these past five years I've learned that the Lord can be trusted week in and week out, that God's mercies are new everyday. I've learned not to take too much into my own hands, but to leave space for the Lord to work. I've learned not to be overly anxious when I know that I don't have it all together because the Lord sometimes uses me more effectively when I'm not entirely scripted. I've learned to trust that God will provide. I'm not always sure how. In my experience it is mostly through natural means

1 Fretheim, Terrence. *Exodus Interpretation Series* (Louisville; John Knox Press 1991) p. 181

like the manna in the dessert during the Exodus, but sometimes rather unexpectedly and wonderfully in the most surprising ways.

For example, I worried about how we were going to pay for college tuition for our three children on a pastor's and teacher's salary. God provided! We had to plan carefully. We saved. But through it all I've learned that God provides. Is anyone here trying to plan for retirement these days? Is anyone concerned about his/her portfolio in this wildly fluctuating market? Are any of us counting on Social Security?

There is always plenty to be anxious about in life, plenty to cause us to want to go back, and plenty that encourages an idealized memory of where we came from. Do you believe God will provide? Can you trust that God knows your practical and physical needs as well as your spiritual ones? Can you let go of the anxiety and worry that may accompany your planning? It doesn't mean we become passive, far from it! The Israelites were tested to determine if they were hoarders, living by their own stockpiles, or whether they were learning to trust in God daily.

Jesus fed people in his ministry. In the miracle of the loaves and fishes Jesus demonstrated he knows about hunger and has the capacity to meet human need, using only a sack lunch some kid brought with him. Christ asks us to bring what we have and then uses it. At one point Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry"² Each week I try to bring my meager sack lunch to the Lord and hope and pray that Christ will multiply it to feed those who are hungry for the bread from above. What you have in your hands may not seem like enough, but it is enough for today and God can be trusted for tomorrow.

Our deacons and elders being ordained and installed today may not feel that they have the wisdom or skills to fulfill their calling as they begin their term of service, but they are willing to step out and trust that God will provide what they need. Without that confidence we live sheltered and meager lives. We nurture only small dreams and seek

² John 6:32ff

to achieve nothing more significant than a comfortable life for ourselves.

The Lord invites us to join in the adventure of living, to trust in God's daily provision, to enjoy what comes to us as a gift freely given from the One who made and redeems us. The Sabbath is an invitation to rest in God's provision. Life comes not only from what we can make of it, but first and foremost as a free gift from the hand of God. So enjoy the gift and (more importantly) trust the giver. Amen