

Bread from the Old Testament: Manna

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 & John 6:24-35

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Last week we started looking at the Old Testament companion readings to John 6, which is a chapter exploring Jesus as the bread of life. Elisha the prophet, the man of God, fed 100 people in the midst of a famine, with an abundance that God provided when the humans only could see scarcity. This week, when the John 6 reading clearly refers to the manna from heaven as bread from heaven, a sign of God's providence and presence, the Old Testament reading is obviously going to be that story.

Lots of scholars have a theory, with good reason and plenty of evidence, that the story of the Exodus is the formative story for the Israelites and Jewish faith. They return to it each year in the Passover celebrations, and its powerful message of God's deliverance of the people obviously holds significant meaning for Jewish belief ever since.

For our own tradition, when we look at what is for us, the Old Testament, I could probably put together an argument that this story of manna in the wilderness is pretty formative and foundational. Especially when we look at the ministry of Jesus, feeding and providing what was needed for people is key. The crucifixion and resurrection don't fit into this framework exactly, but there's a good chunk of Christian belief and practice that can trace themselves to this wilderness story. John 6 is one such reference, but there are more.

There are a couple of versions of this manna from heaven story: one in Exodus and one in the book of Numbers. They're different in some places and similar in others. According to the timeline in the Exodus version, the newly delivered, formerly enslaved people are just barely out of Egypt. Well, easy for me to say. They've been away for about a month and a half, not knowing where they are going, not really knowing their leader Moses beyond his interaction with Pharaoh and what seems increasingly evident is his lack of skill in leading them to the Promised Land. More importantly, they don't really know this God that Moses has given credit for their liberation. They've been in Egypt for a couple of generations, and worship of God has been prohibited there. Moses keeps saying the Lord has delivered them, but they don't know this God, nor have they built up any reason to trust in this God. The events of the Exodus are fading in their memories as they face the hardship of the wilderness, and they start to complain.

They complain that they're hungry. It's a natural complaint, and they direct it to Moses. God hears their complaint and assures Moses that there will be bread raining from heaven for them each morning, and they are to collect enough bread for the coming day, only as much as they need. On the day before the Sabbath, there will be enough for them to gather for two days, so they aren't working on the Sabbath. Interestingly, they haven't received the law yet that commanded them to keep the Sabbath, but God is setting the pattern already.

Not only does the Lord rain bread from heaven each morning, but there are also quail every evening. Meat and bread. In the morning, the Israelites look on the ground and on the desert floor there is what Exodus calls a "fine, flaky substance." We have no idea what it looked like. The Israelites themselves didn't really know what they were looking at and apparently didn't connect it with God's promise of bread from heaven. Because the first thing they say is "What is it?" which sounds an awful lot like "manna" in Hebrew.

They gather what they need, and they have enough. But they also try to save some for the next day, and it grows worms and rots and then Moses gets mad at them. Really and truly, they're just acting like humans. I suspect it's exactly what we would do—try to save some food for later, for when we're certain that God will forget to make it rain bread from heaven.

It's not too far back in our memories that we can remember frantically searching for toilet paper and then buying more than we needed. I still have extra flour and sugar and yeast in my pantry, because I don't want to run out the next time a calamity comes. I guess I think, "as long as I can make chocolate chip cookies, we'll survive," which is a sad but true commentary on what I prioritize for survival!

The Israelites have known God as a deliverer and liberator, and now they are coming to know God as a provider. The Lord provides for them, day by day, faithfully, for their wandering in the wilderness. And that provision is carried over into our Christian beliefs and rituals. Clearly, in the passage that Etta read, the crowd that is following Jesus around knows this manna story. They connect the bread that Jesus gave them with the bread from heaven that was given to their ancestors. They're getting a glimmer of understanding, I think, that Jesus is the Son of God.

Give us this day our daily bread. We're still asking God to provide, to feed us, to give us what we need rather than what we want. If we mean the words we say each week then we're asking God to provide. Give us enough for today, and help us figure out how to trust you for tomorrow's bread. What is it? What is the

daily bread that we're asking for? For too many people in the world, it is literal bread, food, sustenance to survive. For most of us, it doesn't have to be actual bread. It's patience and hope and energy and perseverance. It's clear eyes and discernment and truth and even faith. We need plenty of things not just on a one time basis, but enough for every day, repeatedly, God providing a reassurance that God is present with us. For that came with the gift of manna too. They were assured each day that God had not forgotten them, that the Lord was still present with them.

We will gather at the table today, and we will pray those words that Jesus taught us to say. Give us this day our daily bread. Our daily manna. Our daily reminder that we are to trust God to provide. In a little bitty piece of bread and a little sip of juice, we find that God has provided, that our spirits are fed, that even when we complain, God provides, whatever it is that we need and cannot manufacture ourselves, day by day.