



“What it Means to Give: Bread and Whine”

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Exodus 16:2-15

“Are we there yet?” “I’m tired!” “I’m thirsty!” “What time is it?” “I want to get out of my seat!” These are questions constantly asked when my family goes on a road trip. And the kids often complain, too. When you’re traveling, whining and complaining is normal. It is what we do. We must’ve learned it from the Israelites. They all complained... every single one of them. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained, saying, “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.” I’m sure Moses and Aaron felt like two exasperated parents sitting in the front seat of a minivan, threatening to turn the car around. They probably shouted while looking in the rearview mirror, “We rescued you from slavery and saved you from Pharaoh. We freed you from oppression.” And the exhausted kids moaned, “But we’re hungry, we’re tired, we want to go home, are we there yet?” Whine, whine, whine. The Israelites not only complained against Moses and Aaron - they complained against God. And what did God do with all of this grumbling? Did God give up on them and turn the car around? No. God gave them bread with their whine. God gave sustenance with the griping. God provided in the midst of their protesting. And with the giving of bread in response to their whining, the people were brought into communion with God and they knew that God would provide for them each and every day.

But forty years is a really long time. It is a lifetime under those circumstances; a lifetime of wandering and being nomads, a lifetime of marrying and burying, of giving birth, and getting into arguments. It was a lifetime of doubting God’s plan and wondering why God sent them, all of them, out into the wilderness without the proper provisions. Several commentators think the Israelites needed to wander in the wilderness for a lifetime so that no one would still be alive who remembered Egypt; that maybe God wanted a new and faithful people who weren’t obsessed with the past and desired to live into God’s promised future; that God wanted a new generation of people who weren’t attached to idealized memories that minimized their oppression and pain; that God wanted to make sure that no one remembered the false memories of fleshpots, meat, and all you can eat breadsticks; that God wanted to make sure they didn’t cling to the made-up memories of full bellies and full lives.

I’m sure the raining of bread from heaven was a relief to Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites as everyone would finally believe, trust God, and be more cooperative right then and there! But, as we saw last week at the parting of the Red Sea, God had already proven to be a God of freedom. God had already released them from captivity in Egypt. God had led them in the desert with fire and clouds and then through an impassable barrier. So, why grumble now? Why didn’t the Israelites already believe in a loving, sustaining, and nourishing God?

It's because the wanderers were hungry. They were tired. They were dying. They couldn't believe in a generous God because they were human and in the midst of despair. They couldn't see beyond their current struggles. Yet, even in the midst of their despair, God took care of them. God's providence was new every day. God's providence was a unique and unusual thing. As the Israelites moved into their long wilderness journey, God found new ways to provide for them. God's provision was new every morning because the Israelites could only gather as much as they could eat that day. No doubt this is part of the origin of the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Daily it rained bread from heaven and daily the people were reminded that in the wilderness of life, God was present to sustain and provide for them. And so, the Israelites lived by the providence of God, one day at a time.

The image of undeserved manna in the wilderness may offer hope to us today that God can and will provide in new and fresh ways. We are assured that God is near to us, even when we only see the empty desert on the horizon. The text says, as the Israelites "looked toward the wilderness...the glory of the Lord appeared." It was not just on a mountaintop or just to Moses and Aaron that God appeared. God was nearby, listening to those whom we might today be tempted to call faithless, those who complained to God because they were hungry, anxious, dislocated, in unfamiliar territory and without clear paths towards the future. It is in this wilderness of life that God is always present.

But we still complain. It doesn't seem to matter what God has done in the past. We are in the wilderness right now and we are hungry right now. We are suffering now. We are adrift and alone, afraid and abandoned. And just like the Israelites, we often let God have it. We whine and complain, we grumble and gripe. But you know what? That's ok. It's ok to let God have it. God can handle it. If we are to believe in a God that created all things, loves all things, and heals all things, we need to know that God can take upon God's self our burdens and our pain. God heard the Israelites. God heard their complaints. And it was in God's hearing that God was motivated to liberate the Israelites from slavery. The groans and cries of an enslaved people caused God to remember the covenant God had made with their ancestors and to then redeem them from their captivity.

One commentator points out that God's act of hearing sharply contrasts with Pharaoh's refusal and inability to hear. If hearing demands a response then it is possible Pharaoh chose not to hear so that he wouldn't have to answer to the cries of the oppressed. The beneficiaries of power in political and social systems are often proficient at ignoring the realities they do not wish to acknowledge. But unlike Pharaoh, God heard and God acted. God recognized the uncertainty and fear of the assembly of Israelites. We must choose to hear the groans and the cries of the oppressed. We must choose to hear their voices and take action to bring freedom. We must not imitate Pharaoh and refuse to hear. We need to imitate God, and acknowledge and respond to complaints that fall from the lips of those who are hungry for food and starved for freedom. If we are truly a listening community, we must ensure food security, fair wages, equal representation and opportunities for everyone. We must choose to be a listening people.

Dr. Elna Solvang, Religion professor at Concordia College, says, "God hears the complaining of the Israelites. God recognizes not only their need for sustenance -- daily bread -- but their desire

for a life beyond scarcity -- meat. God responds by sending quail for meat and manna for bread. God proves to be a different type of lord than Pharaoh.”

We believe in a God who is different type of lord than Pharaoh. We have a God who gives us bread even when we whine. We have a God who goes with us as we are all walking wilderness journeys. We have a God who understands our struggles, our sorrows over the lives we left behind, the lives when we were healthier, happier, or more secure. We have a God who understands that the desert really is a sad place, especially when there's no bread or water, no place to rest. God is ok with our complaints because the Bible is filled with laments and wailing and mourning and crying out to God. There is something holy about groaning and complaining towards God. The secret isn't in learning how to pray in a more sterilized way; the secret is realizing we are hungry, we are desperate, that we are travelers in a barren desert. There are times we are forced to abandon graciousness and thanksgiving and simply voice our despair, admitting that we are all in need of the bread of life.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Polish-born Jewish writer, once said, “I only pray when I'm in trouble; the problem is, I'm in trouble all the time.” God sees us in our trouble and rains bread on us. The text reminds us, “You will see the glory of the Lord because the Lord has heard your grumblings.” It is a liberating thing that God hears our grumblings. It is a liberating thing that God rains bread instead of stones upon us.

This idea of raining bread upon us even when we don't deserve it reminded me of a story. When I was doing my Doctorate on postmodern communities, I researched the mendicants, beggars who eventually became the Dominican and Franciscan friars. And I began to study the stories surrounding St. Francis' life. St. Francis once lived at a hermitage called Montecasale, where he brought in a young, rich youth who wanted to live a generous and holy life. St. Francis gave the young boy the name Brother Angelo. Now, the hermitage was in a rough area of the region and it was well known that three robbers resided nearby. While Francis was away, robbers came to the house seeking food. Angelo, serious about his duties to take care of the hermitage, condemned and rebuked the robbers and sent them away. An hour later, St. Francis returned to the house, weary after walking a long way on the rough mountain paths. Over his shoulder, he carried a bag of food that had been given to him for the Brothers and for the poor in their care.

Angelo told Francis the story of the robbers he had sent away, expecting accolades for his decisive action in condemning the thieves. Yet, Francis told Angelo that he should've received them with gentleness, not harshness, as that is what Jesus would have done. Francis instructed Angelo to take the bag of food and go find the three robbers and apologize, asking them to stop doing evil. If they would do good, the Brothers would feed them and take care of them for the rest of their lives. So, Angelo took off down the road, caught up to them, and fell on his knees, begging for forgiveness. Angelo said, “You must be hungry and thirsty, so here: eat, and drink, and come back to Montecasale where there's more.” The thieves, once they recovered from their shock, came with him, and became friars, friends of Francis and the Brothers.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you are going through, God gives us bread. We might be in the wilderness and complaining is all we can do. Yet, we are assured that God provided for the Israelites' needs and God will provide for our needs as well. The glory of God was in the lives of

the Hebrew people and the glory of God is also in our lives. We are all on this wilderness journey together and it is up to us, in the midst of our complaining and grumbling, to lean into the blessings of God. If we believe in a God who rains bread from heaven and if we know we will be given our own daily bread, we must throw the sack of food over our shoulders and find everyone on the margins who is hungry and lonely, sick or sinner, priest or robber, and we must share our blessings.

Leo Buscaglia was a popular Special Education professor at the University of Southern California and a best-selling author. He was called “Dr. Love” because he taught courses in human connectedness and the meaning of life. And, his classes were packed every semester. At the start of each semester, Dr. Buscaglia always assigned a paper where the students are asked to answer one question: “What would you do if you had only five days to live?” The answers were provocative and I’m sure many of you can imagine the responses. “I’d say I’m sorry.” “I’d say I love you.” “I’d say thank you to my parents.” The students turned those papers in but when they get them back, they weren’t graded. Instead, Dr. Buscaglia wrote in bold letters across the top of the paper, “Why don’t you do it now? What are you waiting for?”

What are we waiting for? I know many of us feel we are in the midst of long and lonely journeys through the wilderness. I know we are strapped for cash and short on time. I know we are overwhelmed by the ignorance, hurt, anger, and pain in the world. We might grumble and groan, we might murmur and moan. But God hears us in our complaining and chooses to bless us. God is moved by our muttering and still decides to rain bread upon us. We must never forget to trust in the Creator and Sustainer who provides for us and satisfies our deepest hunger. And because we are blessed and because we are God’s people, we must choose to bless others. We must act when the voices of those crying out from the margins are muffled and silenced. We must be Christ-followers and be bearers of the Bread of Life. This is what it means to give. God gives us bread even when we whine, and so, we must do the same. What are we waiting for?

Amen.