

Manna
Ephesians 4:1-16; Exodus 16:2-4,9-15

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I think David Brooks must have read our Old Testament Lesson about the Israelites before he wrote his column this past week. Listen:

“I’m sometimes grumpier when I stay at a nice hotel. I have certain expectations about the service that’s going to be provided. I get impatient if I have to crawl around looking for a power outlet, if the shower controls are unfathomable, if the place considers itself too fancy to put a coffee machine in each room. I’m sometimes happier at a budget motel, where my expectations are lower and where a functioning iron is a bonus and the waffle maker in the breakfast area is a treat.¹

Brooks, of course, is a social commentator and not a biblical scholar, so I do understand if we see a bit of a disjuncture between the lack of a coffee maker in one’s hotel room and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years, but stay with me, I think there’s a corollary that carries.

In larger measure the corollary that carries is the amnesia that so many of us experience in looking at our lives from the vantage point of gratitude. Moreover, for those of us who cast our trust on God, it’s our amnesia about trust.

And certainly, for the Israelites, that becomes a recurrent theme. There is a fair amount of grouching in Exodus and Moses, the leader, is frequently in the crosshairs of the Israelites’ whining. Indeed, the very rich hyperbole of the story we read this morning gives us just a little hint as to an emerging faith crisis in Israel. After a brief stint in an oasis replete with streams and palm trees, the Israelites are once more called to go forth in faith, trusting God, and it doesn’t go so well.

¹ David Brooks, *The Structure of Gratitude* in The New York Times, July 28, 2015

Terence Fretheim characterizes the story like this, “Its focus has to do with a *food crisis* which leads to a *faith crisis*. The lack of discernment of God’s *presence in the ordinary* leads to denial of God’s *activity in the extraordinary*.”²

And so in crisis, the minute their faith is tested, they lash out at Moses and Aaron.

The charges go something like this, “You’ve dragged us out into the wilderness to kill us. At least when we were slaves we got to eat.”

Now I can assure you that Moses and Aaron haven’t lead the Israelites anywhere they didn’t want to go. While we haven’t yet gotten to the Ten Commandments where God will lay out the terms of the deal and establish the people as God’s people, it wasn’t whinging over a hangnail that got God’s attention in the first place. God doesn’t say to Pharaoh, “I have heard the whining of my people,” but rather, “I have hear the cries of my people in bondage.”

The slavery of the Israelites in Egypt wasn’t a bad summer internship, it was a generations long suppression of God’s people complete with attempted genocide – as the Israelites grew more numerous, Pharaoh instructed the midwives to do in the children of the Israelites when they were born – they were saved only by disobedient midwives.

What God addresses in Exodus was indeed the suffering of God’s people, but it seems God’s people have forgotten suffering.

Better to have a full belly and slavery than freedom and uncertainty, goes the refrain, and they were mad at Moses and Aaron for their parts in it. There is a word here for anyone who has ever felt petty.

² Fretheim, Terence. *Exodus* in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller, Achtemeier, eds. (JKP: Louisville, 1991) p181

Have you ever had that happen? If you are a parent who has ever been accused of ruining your eight year old's life, you probably know what I'm talking about.

I don't have children of my own, but for many years I worked with youth, so I do have some sense of scope when it comes to the ruination of lives... I was with a youth mission trip some 12 or 13 years ago – we'd gone to a place in Tennessee to do some light construction and clean up work in Appalachia. We were staying at a place called, "God's Mountain," and to be fair, it was a little more like "Hell's Half-acre." There were scorpions in the bathrooms and hellfire and damnation in the pulpit, so I took the liberty of taking my group of adolescents to Dairy Queen one night in lieu of the devotionals so I could avoid having to deprogram them. (This was after a thirteen year old came to an advisor in tears because the preacher had just told her that her parents were going to hell for drinking wine.) I was listening to the youth chatting amongst themselves and one said, "This is literally the worst week of my life."

I wanted to say to her, "You mean *figuratively*, and sweetie, life is going to get a whole lot harder than this. Trust me."

I can just sort of imagine Moses and Aaron stepping back from the Israelites and thinking, "Keep it up and I will turn this Exodus around right this minute."

But God doesn't do that.

God doesn't become angry with the people but says instead to Moses and Aaron, "I will rain down bread from heaven on them."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God *does* get angry with the Israelites, but not for this, not now. Not for this. Instead, God provides for all they need, and instructs them to take all that they need but only enough for one day. The book of Numbers recounts the quail a

little bit differently though – God, in a somewhat passive-aggressive move not only sends quail but sends so many that they are stacked three feet deep. “You want meat?” God says, “I’ll give you more than you asked for.”

God *does* get angry with the Israelites, but it’s for things like ignoring the poor and engaging in idolatry, and abusing the alien residents in their towns. But not for this, not for their *faith* needing a shot in the arm. No, God responds with enough for the moment, enough for the day.

Faith and gratitude work like that most of the time, I suspect. I think the writer to the letter to the Ephesians got that too... “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Some did this. *Some* do that. *Some* have this gift. *Some* have that gift... to use for the building of the body of Christ until *all* of us come... to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Its interesting, in the economy of God, *nobody* seems to get it *all*, not all the time at least. There is a certain faithful sharing that is required to bring about the wholeness of the community. Likewise, God doesn’t give a lifetime supply of manna – actually, no, that’s not true, I take it back. God *does* give a *lifetime supply of manna* – but it’s only distributed enough for each day.

Now, I would love to tell you that this *manna moment* in the wilderness changed the faith outlook of the Israelites, but that would be utterly untrue. They will fail God time and

time and time again. Moses will go off to get the covenant from God on the top of Sinai, and they'll make a golden calf. And God will get angry, but the manna will go on.

They will mistrust the guidance of their leaders and resist going into the promised land for fear they will encounter giants there. And the manna will go on.

The manna will go on until the last day before they enter the Promised Land. And on that day, God will instruct Moses to take two quarts of manna, and put it in a jar so that they will *remember*. In fact, we read in the letter to the Hebrews that when God seals the Ark of the Covenant, what is placed in it is Aaron's staff, the pot of manna and the two tablets of the covenant.³ This is a significant moment. They need to remember it. They need to remember God's promises, and so God chooses these symbols of the promise so that they will *remember*.

And so we are to remember also. In the words of institution, when the bread is broken, and the cup is shared, we are instructed to do this *in remembrance of Jesus*.

Like manna in the wilderness, the table we share in remembrance of Jesus is laid to remind us of the promises of God, promises that never, ever fail. This table is always full of the goodness of the Lord. Remember that, and be grateful.

Brooks concludes, "Gratitude is the ability to see and appreciate this other almost magical economy. G.K. Chesterton wrote that 'Thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.'"⁴

But then, life gets in the way of that sense of wonder and gratitude, doesn't it?

So, here's an Anne Lamott story to get us to the table. She had been engaged in committee work for her church and was treated unfairly, and if you've read much Anne

³ Hebrews 9:3-4

⁴ Brooks

Lamott, she will readily acknowledge she sometimes acts a bit rashly. She e-mailed the whole committee she was working with and ratted out the man who had treated her unfairly, ending her e-mail with the words, “*Clearly*, I do not have what it takes to be Presbyterian...I simply cannot spend one more *second* on this matter. Then,” she said, “I hit send.”

“I felt powerful and righteous, for several minutes. Then I felt like hell.”

Has that ever happened to you? She goes on, “But then, something in me cried out: Annie, Stop! Church is where your recovery began, a year before you got sober.” She then notes everything going on that got her to the point of lashing out and concluded the committee member was an innocent bystander. She called a friend and spilled it all, every bit of her embarrassment and bad behavior. Then, she said, her friend spoke.

“She said that when she’d gotten sober, she saw that even though you get the monkey off your back, the circus never really leaves town. ‘Make yourself a nice snack,’ she told me. I made applesauce and oatmeal.” And she concludes, “The best way to change the world is to change your mind, which often requires feeding yourself. It makes for biochemical peace. It almost like a prayer: to be needy, to eat, to taste, and to be filled, building up instead of tearing down. You find energy to do something you hadn’t expected to do, maybe even the holiest things: to go outside and stand under the stars, or to go for a walk in the morning, or in such hard times, both.”⁵

If there is wisdom and grace to be had at this table, perhaps it’s as simple as this:

Trust the manna. It will be there until the Promised Land.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁵ Lamott, Anne. Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith. (Riverhead, NY, 2007) pp251-254