

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 16: 2-21

Macaroni and Cheese. Rice and beans. Flatbread. Potatoes. Manna and quail. Every day. Just enough to get through the day. Would any of these simple meals every day be a sign of provision? Or would it be a sign of poverty and a reason for pity? Is this rudimentary and repetitive spread something to be celebrated? Or is it misery and curse, and a cause of daily worry? Is God providing and there for you, or is God withholding, and being withdrawn from you? And how do you decide?

I wonder, do you remember lean years? Even if you enjoy regular meals and variety in your menu, have a secure and comfortable roof over your head, or have the money for the days ahead, do you remember lean years? Even if you have had friends and families around you, do you remember the lonely seasons? Can you relate to our Exodus reading, of a season of life when you went from meal to meal, week by week, just enough to exist on? Have you ever ventured out and got caught in the transition, not sure where to land, only enough for the day, not knowing how you would get by?

The Lord has delivered the Israelites from their stuck-ness, slavery, subjugation, and a place of great limitation. God has led them out of Egypt. But in their exit from Egypt, they are reminded why Egypt was called the breadbasket of the world, that there was food and rhythms, and one knew what the next day brought, and one did not worry about hearing the stomachs of their children rumble. Egypt, settled along the reliable Nile, enjoyed the rhythms of agriculture and regular water and plenty of food. But now, the Israelites are in the great vast in-between, in between Egypt and Canaan, out among broad swaths of desert. A rugged and desolate landscape. Their lives now require a great deal more of trust and faith than past seasons, even more than when they were in slavery to Pharaoh. Because even in Egypt, they did not worry about food and water, and they knew what tomorrow would bring.

The landscape they are in is comparatively barren. Water is sparse. The landscape is stark. There are no symbols or idols to represent or symbolize the divine, the likes of which were all around them back in Egypt. It is sand, horizon, and each other. And in the uncertainty of this landscape God grants them the consistency of these meager provisions in the morning when they arise, and the quail that fill the sky in the evening. And more so, it is just enough. Can't store it up. You try, it rots. You try to get a significant portion, end up with the same as the person with a

small portion. What our passage describes is this state of dependence and living day by day with the next day to be figured out tomorrow, like one does in the wilderness, like those who move about seasonally and semi-nomadically are quite familiar with.

So the Israelites grumble. They complain. They start comparing. But they do not compare their provision of the day with a reality where they might have no food at all. If they did, it might inspire gratefulness for what they have. No instead, they compare their current reality with the “fleshpots of Egypt.” They grumble. They insinuate that Moses and Aaron have led them out into the desert with ill-will or incompetence, leading them out there to die. They complain. Why? I imagine it is the starkness of not knowing where God is or how to leverage God. It is a new physical landscape, but it is also a new spiritual landscape. Where is God in such a place and at such a time? God is there and leading, but they are not used to it. They don’t know how to trust it. How do you move with God and trust God in such a rhythm? They have lost their rhythms and comforts, and the unknowns are overwhelming.

Now, our passage makes their complaining sound pretty bad, like a mother who just dirtied the kitchen making dinner only to have her offspring gripe about the selection. Likewise, God seems to have designed this little season of relationship building. God hears their complaints and provides, but they do not seem content, and they accuse God of ill-will. Yes, they accuse Moses and Aaron, but they know who Moses and Aaron work for. Now to accuse God of trying to kill you sounds a little over the edge. However, we must consider that complaint is part of their religious tradition.

As I spoke of several weeks back when talking about the psalms, the psalms attest to rich tradition of complaint and lament, a songbook that attests to the belief that complaint moves God to act. Complaint causes God to respond. “How long, O LORD? / Will you forget me forever? /How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps 13). “I say to God, my rock, / ‘Why have you forgotten me? / Why must I walk about mournfully / because the enemy oppresses me?’” (Ps 42). “In God we have boasted continually, / and we will give thanks to your name forever. Yet you have rejected us and abased us” (Ps 44).

They complain, not just because they are whiners, but because they want God to deliver them from this daily rhythm of uncertainty and this barren landscape. Complaint is part of how one relates to God. It is what they have learned. And they want out of the uncertainty and strain and barrenness. Can you relate? Have you had such seasons of life? Do you sympathize with their feelings of scarcity and

worry, of bleak provisions, and the day by day stress of wondering? Do you sympathize with their desire for God to act in a new way, to lead them out of the uncertainty and the starkness that has become their world?

While lament and complaint are conventional ways to move God to act, the rub seems to be two-fold. First, they treat God's plans and provision as persecution, and second, they misconstrue the past in a way that makes them want to go back rather than move forward into God's plans.

As to the first, they treat God's leading them through the desert wilderness as if it was a sign of God's absence. They complain to get God to act. And God does act to provide the quail and the manna. But they complain and treat their current state as persecution, when it is the deliverance from their captivity. It is the answer to their last cry for help. For God delivered them from Egypt because he hears their cries and responded. But God leads them into a different landscape. The problem is, they do not seem able to experience God in this place nor in ways that God has already provided.

They had been in Egypt for generations. They are not familiar with the wilderness spiritual tradition. The daily rhythms of the wilderness are oppressive and threatening to them. But this wilderness tradition is not new. God can be found in such a place. God is present there even though the things often associated with God's presence, like water, and cities, and symbols, are scarce or absent. God is confident that he can provide. God seems to see it as a fruitful time to learn trust, to see this daily rhythm of journeying through the wilderness as God's provision and God's answer, not as something to be delivered from.

But it is hard. They have lived in Egypt for a long time, and the wilderness is for them a place of barrenness and emptiness. They want out of the uncertainty, away from the worries, away from the feelings of emptiness and worry. They are not used to experiencing God in such a place, or in such a season. They view God's provision as a predicament to be delivered from.

Do you find yourself in some kind of wilderness spell? Or do you remember one? By that I mean a place where you are not used to seeing God's presence or the sense of God's presence, and you want out. By that I mean a season where you have to trust day by day, and the uncertainty doesn't seem to relent, and you are prone to see God's provision as a state to be delivered from? It is a new landscape, a new tradition. It requires new eyes and ears to see and hear God here. And while it is hard, I wonder if we could adapt in ways that the Israelites struggled to do. To

see God in that place. To see the provisions of the day not as persecution, but a sign of God's presence and care?

To think this way may invite us to listen and look with new eyes, to see God in news ways and in new places? What if that place you are stuck in is not a curse, but a place where God can be encountered? What if this season is an opportunity to grow in relationship with God, day by day in trust? What seems to push God beyond the point of patience at times is the Israelites refusal to adapt, to see that God is providing, that God is in this place, and that God will be faithful to lead them to a promised land.

The second trap the Israelites fall into is misconstruing the past. They seem to forget their cries back there, the cries that God heard and caused God to respond. They seemed to have forgotten their grumbling about being slaves and about their harsh treatment. All of a sudden, they are missing their old life, wanting to go back to what they knew (k-n-e-w), rather than press on into the new (n-e-w). That is the temptation or pitfall perhaps of retelling the past. Our memory can be skewed. We remember selectively, misconstruing the past as a response to the present.

The last year and a half have been hard, and the uncertainties continue even though we are tired of them and ready to be done. We continue with discord and unrest and uncertainty. This is true for us as a country. It is true for the church. There is much we would like to be delivered from. As a church, it is a season of transition. We will be talking this fall about who Providence is at its core, where Providence has been and who Providence is today and where Providence is going in this next chapter. For many of us, this season of uncertainty and loss of rhythms might represent where you are at personally as well.

As we consider our wilderness seasons of transition, our passage invites us to stop complaining for the moment and to consider if God is in such a place and in such a time? It is a starker landscape, but it is not likely God has led us here to kill us, or to abandon us. What if we sought to adapt in the ways that the Israelites struggled to?

Now, I issue a caution, lest we conflate all circumstances that someone here may be going through as some kind of God-ordained reality that you must endure happily. I will not claim such confidence to know what you are enduring, nor suggest that all circumstances are ones to grow content with. But I do know that we grow weary in uncertainty. We are prone to grumble when God does not come through the way we want God to. We are prone to have selective memory about the past. And we are prone to complain to get God to lead us on to something else.

And while God may do just that, perhaps there is something for us in this place and in this season. Maybe God can be experienced here if we have the eyes to see it. Perhaps there is gratitude to be had in the daily provision if we have the poise and patience to live in the day.

And we should be reminded, on this communion Sunday, that we follow a Christ who does not run from adversity, nor see trouble as a sign of God's absence. Rather we are called to follow Christ's example, and Christ's example is that Christ does not flee difficulty and hardship, does not flee humility and lowliness, but takes it on. He sets aside his power and his security and his clarity and becomes obedient to the point of death. For even there, Christ claims victory, Christ claims God's power and God's presence.

We have inherited a rich tradition of complaint. It is a tradition that seeks to invoke God's help and intervention in desperate circumstances. But the wilderness is not necessarily a place of God's absence. God can work even here, if we have the faith and the eyes to see it, and the willingness to move into the unknown future. And when God delivers us from trouble into a different landscape, we may have to learn to look and listen differently for God's presence and help. Because to listen to someone complain every day about the food put in front of them, well even God himself, the great exemplar of patience, will eventually lose it.

And all God's people said...