

“Gathering Manna”  
Psalm 105:1-6; Exodus 16:2-15;  
Matthew 20:1-16

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Yesterday morning, I awoke, and I poured some extra-strong coffee, and I sat in the quiet, and I wanted someone to tell me that everything was going to be OK. This week, the smoke has been stifling, some friends have recently been tested for COVID-19, and the national news has been very disheartening. I just wanted someone to give me hope that things would get better. In the last few months, some of my friends have made jokes about what the next plague would be. What will the next challenge be? I know in my heart that the Israelites would have been happy to trade us for 2020, but still.

Can you even remember September 2019? Now most of us are on a journey that we generally wish was different. Our suitcases are gathering dust, but we have traveled to places that are unfamiliar and seem quite threatening. Places where we cannot trust the air that we breathe, and where others cry out for breath because of social justice or because of the raging fires. We wear masks because we want to keep ourselves and others safe, and yet, it is a journey where many problems have become unmasked.

We did not choose this journey, but we must admit that we have probably played some part in creating it. Fortunately, along the way there have been many God-sightings. Acts of kindness. Selflessness. Medical personnel who have sacrificed their health for others. First responders doing more than they ever expected. Teachers caring for our children in ways that they never expected. Many people who make minimum wage providing essential services to make my life easier. There have been generous gifts made to help the homeless, the hungry, and the unemployed.

Families have experienced unexpected joy in being together with simple walks, time in the park, time together that was not expected. There have been drive-by celebrations of birthdays, graduations, and many other life passages. There have been selfless acts of kindness. So it has not all been bad. There have been many God-sightings.

On some days I have been overwhelmed, and other days I have been humbled by the pain of others. On most days I have been deeply grateful for my situation. I have been insulated from the harder parts. I have not become ill. I have not lost a job. I am able to go on walks. I do not have to balance a job with worrying about childcare. I live in a beautiful place and do not feel the isolation and confinement of a care center. Because of unearned privilege I can also move freely in this country and feel safe. I am even grateful that one of my family members has fully recovered from the coronavirus.

In many ways, it's a great God coincidence that today's lectionary is about the Israelites facing their hardships and their difficult journey. Today's lectionary readings give us two stories that seem very different from one another. The reading of Exodus 16 reminds us that others were tested on a journey that was full of challenges. It was a journey from oppression to freedom, a spiritual journey towards the liberating life in a promised land of God's love. And then we have the Matthew parable, which is sometimes confusing when you look at it from the perspective of the workers and not the master. The workers in the vineyard cannot understand how everyone could receive the same pay using their system of relative value. However, in each story we are told that God loves us no matter what. When we seek a relationship, he wants to be in relationship with us and give us his grace. Thankfully, he is unfairly generous with his loving grace.

Today I will mostly focus on the encounter with God and the Israelites, one of the many encounters they had on their epic journey. As the Israelites began traveling through the desert, they were beset with incredible hardship. They felt that their leaders were incompetent, and Moses and Aaron had duped them into an escape plan that was worse than the hardship of slavery. Only two and a half months into their journey, they were hungry, and they were angry. In fact, they were starving, and they complained to Moses and Aaron. The Israelites even accused Moses and Aaron of simply bringing them to the wilderness to die.

Eventually Moses, in an act that showed some questionable leadership, said to the people, "Don't blame me. It was God. It was God who brought you into the desert." But God then appeared to Moses and Aaron and came to the rescue. He told Moses and Aaron, "I have heard their complaining. I have heard their grumbling, and I will give them bread each

morning and meat each night. I have heard their grumbling. I will give them manna each morning and quail each evening as a sign of my love. I will be with them every day. With this bread, they will know that I am the Lord, their God.” Have you ever wondered how many recipes there may have been for manna and quail after 40 years?

God wanted the Israelites to know him. He wanted to be in relationship with them. God wanted his people to be free and be in communion with him. It seems that complaining and grumbling was part of the relationship. If they grumbled to God, they were in relationship. He was not angry with them, but answered their grumbling with food. He wanted them to be reminded daily of his love for them. Each day started with the gathering of manna, and each evening, quail. He was in the beginning and in the ending of their day.

It seems there are several lessons from this story. The first, that his grace and love will be enough for each day. He simply said, “Trust me. Don’t hoard. I’ll be faithful. Trust me. Don’t overthink this. Trust me. There will be enough for you today. You don’t need to hoard. I will keep my promise. Gather just enough for today. I will be enough for you today.”

A second lesson is that it is OK to grumble and to complain to God. He wants an honest relationship. He can take our pain and our concerns. He wants us to be in relationship. In fact, over half the psalms are about grumbling and pain and anger and frustration. He wants to be in relationship.

Another lesson was that in the midst of everything that was going on, he wanted them to set aside time for sabbath. He even said, “Collect a double portion of manna for the sabbath so you don’t have to worry about devoting energy to gathering food. It will not rot. You can abide in me. Set aside time for us to be in relationship. No matter what, I want to be with you. This journey is difficult, so set aside a day each week for you to rest and so that I can restore your spirit.” The Psalmist repeated this command when he said, “Be still and know that I am your God.”

A final lesson was that he wanted them to know that he would be with them throughout the journey, even when the challenges seemed overwhelming. “I will comfort you when you grieve. I will give you strength

to face the challenges of the day. I will surround you with people who will care for you. I will be with you no matter what.”

I need that assurance right now. I need to know that his grace is available each day. I need to know that he can deal with my grumbling. I need to be reminded to create sabbath time and that he will be with me as I go forward into the coming days, no matter what. I’m certainly drawn to this story because I have grumbled much in the last few months. I still grumble about the difficult journey that is ahead. Often my grumbling is in the form of a prayer, but sometimes I think I’m just grumbling. I am no longer master of my day planner. I want the illusion of control. I yearn to be with other people without fear. I am tired of my changed life that prevents me from worshiping with others. I’m tired of the civil discord and toxic discourse. I worry about our shared future. I’m tired and want things to be different. I also grumble because I hurt for others who are facing even greater hardships.

So, tomorrow morning, I will make some more strong coffee and gather an unearned portion of manna, God’s grace, a portion that will be sufficient for the day. And I will gather this manna, knowing that God will be with me in the coming months. I will gather this manna so that I can live into the hope of restored relationships. I will gather manna and then seek to be the answer to someone else’s prayer. But I must take time to gather the manna and give thanks. Amen.