

“Raining Bread from Heaven”
Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30

Philippians 1:25b-28

²⁵I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

²⁷Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing.

Exodus 16:2-15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “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.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you,

and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.”

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?”

⁸And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’”

¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

The Sermon

Sometimes, an event happens that doesn't fit the expected storyline—that goes against the anticipated narrative so incongruously or so severely that it has within it the power to *change* the narrative.

Eight months ago, I delivered a sermon in which some disheartening realities were lifted up before God as both prayer of confession and prayer for intercession.

Violence, intimidation and threats—specifically, racist, homophobic and xenophobic violence and intimidation and threats—were spiking in this country; and it felt like pathological forces, long pent up, had been released.

The fabric of our humanity, not to mention the tattered and beleaguered remnants of our national unity, had been churned up and shredded for the sake of political leverage in a truly heinous election campaign season.

And it seemed like the worst of what we can be was emerging from underground, to take center stage on platforms where, not so long ago, we had allowed ourselves to entertain hopes for a civil and civic discourse.

Since that time, we have had Charlottesville and a hundred other warped appeals to the lowest common denominators of our fractured humanity.

One thing that has been a concern during the unfolding of all of this has been the risk of normalization: that this ugliness and disunity, and the leveraging of people's

fears and insecurities, will become so commonplace, and the discussions about it so tiresome and fruitless, that we'll begin to accept the unacceptable and call it "normal."

And then, last Saturday, something unspectacular but quietly surprising happened.

On September 16, a rally was held in Washington that mainly drew vocal supporters of President Trump. No Confederate flags that I could see, certainly no swastikas; and those who were there for the pro-Trump rally wore hats that said "Make America Great Again" along with shirts that read, in part, "No anti's" and "No racist[s]."

Hawk Newsome is a Black Lives Matter activist who came down from New York specifically for the rally in Washington. He and a contingent of fellow activists were making their way through the crowd, prepared for confrontation, when one of the rally's speakers invited him to come up onto the stage and speak.

They said, "We're going to give you two minutes of our platform to put your message out. Whether they disagree or agree with your message is irrelevant. It's the fact you have a right to have the message."

Days later, Newsome said to a reporter, "It was the last thing I expected."

He said that when he went up onto the platform and started delivering his message, he was surprised to look up and see that people in the crowd were actually listening.

And at that point, he said, a word that he was not expecting to think of popped into his head: love.

"As Christians," he later said, "as concerned people, we [in Black Lives Matter] care about everyone... The reason we march in the street is because we love people. We fight for people."

But maybe the most amazing moment of all came when he wrapped up his speech by shouting, "If we really want to make America great, we do it together"—at which point the mostly white, mostly pro-Trump crowd exploded in applause and cheers for Black Lives Matter activist Hawk Newsome.¹

Sometimes, an event happens that is so entirely counter to the anticipated narrative that it has within it the power to change the narrative.

By now we are accustomed to the theological idea of God providing manna from heaven. I daresay the people of Israel, stressed-out, uncomfortable, whose decades of wandering in the wilderness were just beginning, had a rather different perspective.

Immediately after they had made their miraculous escape from Egypt, they went into the wilderness, and for three days, they didn't find any water; when they finally did find some, it was too bitter to drink.

And they complained against Moses, and he cried out to God; and the God showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. And God said to the people, "If you listen carefully to my voice, and do what is right in my sight, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am God, who heals you." And then they came to a place where there were springs of water and palm trees.ⁱⁱ

So, great! Problem solved. But, as it soon became clear, only temporarily. Within days, the whole congregation of the Israelites were complaining against Moses again. They said, "If only God had killed us back in Egypt, where at least we sat by the fleshpots and had all the bread we could eat! You've brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger!"

Probably not for the first time and definitely not for the last, God's people created, embellished and embraced a myth of the past, wherein everything was just fine "before."

Suddenly, oppression, slavery, and death at the hands of the Egyptians were now being remembered only as that time when we used to be able to sit around and have plenty to eat and drink.

More importantly, the fact that God had saved them was, already, no longer a life-defining cause for celebration. Now it was just seen as a royal pain, a major inconvenience, a reason to wish that God had just left everything alone, because the freedom of living as God's chosen people demanded too much, of them, did not provide everything they wanted, and left them uncertain about where they stood in the world or what the future might hold.

And God heard this. And in the evening, quails came up and covered the camp; they had plenty to eat that night.

And in the morning, there was a layer of dew all around the camp. When the dew lifted, there was a fine flaky substance all over the ground.

When the Israelites saw it, they looked around, and translations go one of two ways: in the Hebrew, it says, literally,

“When the children of Israel saw it,
they said, one to another: ‘*man hu*’
for they did not know it” (or “did not know what it was”).

Research of the ancient languages in the Sinai Peninsula has led scholars to believe that the Hebrew word “*man*” meant something like “what.”ⁱⁱⁱ So while the King James Version says the Israelites said it was *manna*, more recent translations tend to indicate that they were just saying, “What is it?”

So I like to think they looked at it and said, “Oh, look! Manna!”

Then they looked at each other and said, “What’s manna?”

And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”

And the people had their fill. Not *more than* their fill; there would never be enough to hoard. They would, all of them, have to rely on God’s daily provision: their daily bread.

When you come to church,
when you say your prayers,
when you sit for a long time, lost in thought,
What do you hope in your heart of hearts that God will provide?
What do you most need, to get through this day, or this life?

This past Thursday and then again yesterday, we enjoyed a bountiful rainfall, gorgeous curtains of torrential rain, water from the heavens not just falling but practically leaping down, parachuting to the rescue to nourish the ground, darkening the soil, replenishing the water table, softening dry and crusted land.

I noticed this extravagant rain shower particularly because I had a walking errand that I needed to do, and while those gorgeous sheets of rain were pouring down all

over Montreat, the weather app on my phone confidently insisted that, at best, there was a 30% chance of rain, and not for another hour or so.

Honestly, I don't expect a weather app on my cellphone to be more knowledgeable about the weather outside my house than I can be by, you know, looking.

But I wonder if God's expectations of me are perhaps a bit more demanding than my expectations are of the weather app in the electronic device I carry whose main function is supposed to be as a phone.

Specifically, when God is going to rain bread from heaven, has my jaded, cynical mind become overconfident in my ability to judge the forecast for myself?

When God is, in fact, presently, currently, immediately, and with boundless generosity and love, showering the world in divine blessings,

is the weather report that I give typically more along the lines of, "well, there's about a 30 percent chance God will do something—and not now, but maybe in a little while?"

Meanwhile, if I would just look out my window, I would see that God is already showering the world with blessings.

Sometimes I don't give that forecast—that God is going to do something; God is going to take care of us; God is going to rain bread from heaven—because I have somehow taught myself not to look for it or expect it.

I continue to think very fondly of a statement made by our friend Jim Weyman: "Climate is what you expect; weather is what you get."

Sometimes I am afraid I have bought into the expectations of the current climate of mistrust;

the climate of anxiety that there isn't enough for all of us;

the climate of everybody wanting to make sure that what I've got isn't going to be taken away or redistributed to somebody who doesn't have enough;

the climate in which people are played against one another, and our worst and most shameful fears are leveraged by people who have a stake in keeping us afraid and

suspicious and xenophobic and determined to hold onto what we have with an iron grip—as if it didn't belong to God long before we ever thought it belonged to us.

Sometimes, something happens that goes so profoundly against the established narrative that it has within it the power to change the narrative.

Even in the parched and toxic climate of these days,
God will make it rain bread from heaven.

September is officially Hunger Action Month. But in God's kingdom, until there is no more hunger, *every* month is Hunger Action Month. And if we look closely, we may see that in this setting where this is so much desperation among so many people, it is raining bread.

Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministry provides services for people with basic and emergency needs, including local residents and stranded travelers. Among their ministries are a year-round food bank and, in the winter, warm shelter and a hot meal.^{iv}

Bounty & Soul delivers free, healthy food—fresh produce—for whoever needs it. They operate five weekly markets throughout our area, each of which is accompanied by wellness and nutrition programs. They distribute more than 7,500 pounds of food to more than 700 people every week.^v

Hand in Hand of the Swannanoa Valley raises money to help provide for children. School counselors let them know when there are children with holes in their shoes, who can't pay the cost of field trips, and who literally don't have any food for the weekends. Hand in Hand works with the schools to make sure each child's most basic needs are met.^{vi}

MANNA Food Bank serves Western North Carolina in Asheville, and has distributed tens of millions of pounds of food, through well over 200 food assistance programs in Western North Carolina counties. Their vision is as ambitious as it is simple: to see Western North Carolina hunger-free.^{vii}

The Nickel-a-Meal contributions that you give through the presbytery of Western North Carolina support emergency food distribution as far away as Malawi and as close as the Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministry.

In Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi, he implored them to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I'll know you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel."

When we work to feed the people around us, we are given the high, holy privilege of participating with God in raining bread from heaven. From those to whom much has been given, much is to be expected (Luke 12:48).

In Hebrew, *beth* means house, or place—I used to serve a congregation called Bethpage, which came from *beth-phage*, which means "house of unripened figs."

The word for bread is *lechem*.

14 centuries after Moses, a young woman gave birth among the stable animals in a house in an ancient town called *Beth-lechem*: the place of bread.

Sometimes, an event breaks into the narrative that it so profound that it has within it the power to change the narrative.

I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and you will know that I am God.

And the Bread that came from heaven said,

"Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

He said to his followers, "Don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we wear?' But strive first for the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness—*dikaiosuné* (δικαιοσύνη), what is right and just in the sight of God—and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31-33).

And he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

Many Americans this week have been watching the new Ken Burns documentary on PBS about the Viet Nam War. I am also hearing that there are many who simply cannot; it is still and will always be too close, too real, too painful.

Those who have been able to watch may have seen, on Wednesday night, a recent interview with a Viet Cong veteran—that was the North Vietnamese force that U.S. soldiers were sent to fight against.

His name is Le Cong Huan. Aging now, he was a Viet Cong fighter who, as both sides tended to do toward the other, had only ever known or imagined his enemy—all of them, all of us—as a soulless, bloodthirsty, killing machine.

And now in 2017, still registering the disorienting surprise that he had felt half a century ago as a young guerilla fighter, he says, in Vietnamese which is translated in subtitles across the bottom of the screen:

“I witnessed Americans dying.
Even though I don’t know their language,
I saw them crying and holding each other.
When one was killed, the others stuck together.
The carried away the body,
and they wept.
I witnessed such scenes and I thought,
Americans,
like us Vietnamese,
also have a profound sense of humanity.
They cared about each other.
It made me think a lot.”^{viii}

Sometimes, an event happens that doesn’t fit the expected narrative, that goes so profoundly against it that it has within it the power to change the narrative.

As Aaron spoke to the congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

And God spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the people. So say to them, ‘At twilight you will eat, and in the morning you will have your fill of bread; and you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
September 24, 2017

ⁱ Carol Costello, “You don’t usually hear this word at a rally” (CNN.com, updated 1:24 PM ET, Sat September 23, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/23/opinions/you-dont-hear-this-at-a-rally-costello-opinion/index.html>.)

ⁱⁱ Exodus 15:22-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ See entry for in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 577. The publishing date is not given but lexicon was produced in 1906 and the present edition published with “many hundreds” of “small corrections” (xii)

^{iv} SVCN’s website (<https://www.svcministry.org/index.htm>) is still under construction. This information was retrieved September 23, 2017.

^v Information is from www.bountyandsoul.org, retrieved September 23, 2017.

^{vi} <http://handinhandsv.org/>, retrieved September 23, 2017.

^{vii} <https://www.mannafoodbank.org/who-we-are/about-manna-foodbank/>, retrieved September 23, 2017.

^{viii} Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, directors, *The Viet Nam War*, “Episode 4: Resolve (January 1966-June 1967).” Original air date September 20, 2017.