

“The Bread God Is Raining from Heaven”
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said: “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’

⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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

Did you hear the Bloop?

In 1997, an array of underwater microphones, placed throughout the Pacific Ocean, spanning more than 3,000 miles, by NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), picked up a “strange, powerful, and extremely loud sound.”ⁱ

“Not only was it loud,” said one writer, but “the sound had a unique characteristic that came to be known as ‘the Bloop.’”ⁱⁱ

For a while, there was speculation that, somewhere down there in the 95% of the undersea world that remains unexplored,ⁱⁱⁱ a giant species of animal previously unknown to humankind was declaring its presence.

To be heard across the endless depths of the Pacific Ocean, it would have to be a creature that would dwarf even the most gargantuan of the known whale species.

And the thing about the Pacific Ocean is: there is plenty of room down there for creatures of that size.

Well, I'm sorry to ruin the frisson of excitement but, as NOAA had thought all along, it was not some gigantic, unknown sea creature. It was the sound of an ice shelf breaking off from Antarctica,^{iv} which happens with some regularity.

There go those scientists again, ruining a good story with their knowledge and data.

But for some people—and even NOAA took 15 years to verify it—it was one of those moments when we are reminded how little we know.

It was a reminder that we are still discovering our home, and how something new can happen any time, or some new revelation can come that changes our view and our understanding of the world God has made. And it starts with a simple question, maybe only muttered, maybe not articulated at all, but reverberating through our minds and our lives: “What is it?”

At a fundamental level, the story of the Covenant People's journey through the wilderness has to do with home: where we come from, where we are, and the place we believe we are going, or that we dream of getting to.

It's about food, and complaint; it's about displacement and hope; it's about God's provision, and keeping the sabbath, and there being enough for everyone as long as we are all looking out for one another.

And the beginning of a new chapter starts with the Israelites looking at a new thing, previously unseen and unsuspected, and muttering a question that phonetically comes down to us as “man hu,” manna, and means simply: What is it?

In a time of displacement from the world we knew and more or less understood—a displacement which we know is temporary, but we also know that it's not a question of going back and picking up where we left

off, but going forward and carrying on, forever at least a little bit changed,

our time, too, is about home, in the sense that we all feel some dislocation, and we remember the world as it used to be—where we came from—and we long to arrive at last at that landing spot when this in-between time of unknowable duration will be finally and definitively over.

And our story is still about displacement from what we knew, and about hope for what will be;

it's still about there being enough for everyone as long as we all look out for one another—and when we don't, human lives are at stake.

It's still about food, and need, and memory, and complaint that it ain't as good as it used to be—the Israelites were now saying that about their 400 years of hard servitude in bondage: “Yeah, but at least we had better food.”

And it's still about God's provision.

God provides. And God wants to feed you. And God wants to feed me. And God wants to feed all of humanity.

And we want to see all of humanity fed, and we also want to have enough for ourselves, too.

And there is enough, if we will all look out for each other.

No Christian finds it acceptable that people live and die in hunger based on where they were born, or to whom, or in what circumstances.

Global economics, political machinations and toxic chatter from radicals, reactionaries, misanthropes and nihilists cloud the point. But

God gave us a cosmos, a planet, and a human order in which there was enough for everyone as long as people lived with a sense of responsibility toward everyone else.

When Moses was told that God was going to rain down bread from heaven, the gift was going to be that the people would be provided their fill, and no more than their fill: their daily bread.

The survival of your neighbors and the flourishing of the whole community would depend on each household both recognizing and caring that if any of them echoed the extraction- and surplus-practice of Pharaoh, gathering more than they needed for their own family for that day, taking from those around them, and trying to horde it for their own families, their neighbors would be deprived and go hungry.

First to suffer would be those physically unable to go out and compete for the limited resource—women with children; the elderly; people with physical and mental disabilities.

If any suffered deprivation due to the faithlessness of some, the whole community would suffer.

Once that begins to happen, faithlessness to God and to each other becomes like a pandemic: spreading from household to household; rumors and conspiracy theories pop up about who started it and why; and it doesn't discriminate about who is affected and who suffers, but as always the least powerful are the most susceptible.

And with astonishing immediacy, the bar of expectation lowers so drastically, that what once was God's basic expectation of how we were supposed to be toward one another—everyone having enough as long as we all look out for each other—is now talked about as if just that baseline expectation—to look out for the needs of our neighbor—is now somehow a supreme act of generosity that is rare and always unexpected, and that the most fawning appreciation is due to anyone

who deigns to share some crumbs with the walking skeletons around them.

It has been said that for all of the pain, and the miracle, that it took to rescue the people of God from bondage in Egypt, it was easier to get the people out of Pharaoh's system than to get Pharaoh's system out of the people.

Even today, we live within social, political and economic realities that defy consensus.

But no Christian finds it acceptable—there is no philosophy, theology or spirituality that can be accurately described as Christian—in which it is acceptable that human beings die from hunger as a result of where and to whom and in what circumstances they were born.

Eventually the Israelites would settle, and God would stop the provision of the daily manna. The people could be responsible for their own provision, and it was time for it to be so.

And the reality was unchanged: there is enough for everyone if we will all look out for the needs of our neighbors.

But still, God provides daily bread.

What is the manna, the what-is-it, that God rains down on you?

What is the bread that God is giving you?

Jesus told the disciples that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hires people to work the land in the early morning, and more at mid-morning, and more at noon, and more in the mid-afternoon, and more with just one hour left in the work day. And they all got paid the same. So the ones who had been working all day were incensed that

everybody else who came later, including people who only worked for an hour, all got paid just as much.

If you're talking about micro-economics, that's a catastrophe. If it's Jesus telling a parable about the kingdom of heaven, then the daily wage is already so infinitely rewarding, so eternal, so holy, so mysterious, so "strange, powerful, and extremely loud" in the ocean of your soul, that there is no way nor is there any reason to imagine parceling it out in percentages or pro-rating it based on how long anyone has been a disciple.

It's not about "You got this, so proportionately, I should get this."

It's about everybody having enough—the breathtakingly extravagant provision of God.

What is the bread that God is giving you to eat?

In the second and third chapters of Ezekiel, God says to Ezekiel in a vision:

"Open your mouth and eat what I give you."

And Ezekiel says, "I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and back..."

And God said:

"Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.
Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it."

"Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey."

What is God giving you to eat?

In her poem called “My Name Is Not ‘Those People,’” Julia K. Dinsmore, who spoke from the lived experience of being in the cycle of poverty, wrote:

“I live with an income of \$621 with \$169 in food stamps for three kids.
 Rent is \$585....That leaves \$36 dollars a month to live on.
 I am such a genius at surviving,
 I could balance the state budget in an hour.
 Never mind that there’s a lack of living-wage jobs.
 Never mind that it’s impossible to be the sole emotional, social,
 spiritual, and economic support for a family.
 Never mind that parents are losing their children
 to gangs, drugs, stealing, prostitution, the poverty industry,
 social workers, kidnapping, the streets, the predator...

“My love is powerful,
 and the urge to keep my children alive will never stop.
 All children need homes and people who love them.
 All children need safety
 and the chance to be the people they were born to be.
 The wind will stop before I allow my sons to become a statistic.
 Before you give in to the urge to blame me,
 the blame that lets us go blind and unknowing
 into the isolation that disconnects
 your humanity from mine,
 Take another look. Don’t go away.
 For I am not the problem, but the solution.”^v

No Christian finds it acceptable—there is no theology that can be accurately described as Christian in which it is acceptable—that people live and die in hunger because of where, or to whom, or in what circumstances they were born.

We will all be reminded of that together on Christmas Day, when we remember a bedraggled family, kept out of human comfort to sleep in

the garage, who will bring into the world the fragile embodiment of God's promise to rain bread from heaven, in a historic but nondescript town called *Beth-lehem*: the house of bread.

And we will remember that God said to the Israelites who were lost and wandering and displaced and disoriented, hungry for something—"I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. And you will know that I am God."

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ⁱ Ian Steadman, "The Bloop mystery has been solved: it was never a giant sea monster" (Wired, 29 Nov 2012, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/bloop-mystery-not-solved-sort-of>)

ⁱⁱ Steadman, "Bloop"

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.noaa.gov/oceans-coasts>, accessed September 13, 2020

^{iv} Steadman, "Bloop"

^v Julia K. Dinsmore, *My Name Is Child of God...Not "Those People": A First Person Look at Poverty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 21-22