

August 1, 2021
“Enough Is Enough”
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

You can't really blame the Israelites for complaining. Yes, they are free – freed from lives of captivity and enslaved labor in Egypt, a foreign land where according to the Book of Exodus their people had been under Pharaoh's thumb for more than 400 years. But freedom was not supposed to look like this. Liberation was not supposed to look like this.

The story Gerry just read for us picks up about a month-and-a-half AFTER their miraculous escape through the parted waters of the Red Sea, well into their wilderness journey. The complaint here is hunger, and the “whole congregation” – EVERYBODY – gets in on it: “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” It's pretty dramatic, really, but it reveals their underlying insecurity and fear.

In the text just before our reading, a mere three days after the Red Sea, on the heels of Miriam's tambourine and an all-out singing-and-dancing celebration of freedom, there is more complaining. This time the issue is thirst. There is no water, and the only water they've found is too bitter to drink. “What shall we drink,” Moses? What shall we drink? Freedom wasn't supposed to look like this. Liberation wasn't supposed to look like this.

And then going back even farther in the text, BEFORE the Red Sea. Pharaoh has already released them, has already let God's people go as the text and the old spiritual put it. They are camped out by the sea, enjoying their very first taste of freedom, the only taste they have ever known, only to look back and find that Pharaoh and his army are in hot pursuit. Chariots and all. The Israelites are already afraid, and understandably so. And their complaint to God, directed at Moses, is a full-throated appeal for the devil they know rather than THIS devil they don't. Somehow even the grass in Egypt looks greener.

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

The narrative irony here is that when Pharaoh let them go, this is back to chapter 13 again, we learn that God deliberately led them the long way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea instead of through the much closer land of the Philistines, because God knew that would lead to war. And faced with war, the Israelites might change their minds and go back to Egypt. It turns out it didn’t matter which way they went, war or wilderness; they wanted to go back to Egypt anyway!

The Israelites are afraid for their lives. Afraid of the completely unknown wilderness before them, so you can’t blame them for complaining. They are free, technically speaking, but we find them feeling very much like freedom has simply taken them from the frying pan to the fire. Freedom is not supposed to look like this. Liberation is not supposed to look like this. The story is painfully familiar.

The “Manna and Quail” – a story, by the way, also referenced in the Quran – in many ways resembles last Sunday’s miraculous “Feeding of the Five Thousand.” It picks up where we left off with themes of scarcity and abundance. John’s narrative last week took us from ‘not possible’ to ‘not enough’ to ‘enough’ to ‘more than enough.’ This Exodus narrative zeros in on the PRACTICE of ‘enough.’ The DISCIPLINE of ‘enough.’

The Israelites have done their complaining, and God has heard their cries. Their aforementioned thirst is quenched, at least for the time being, with God’s intervention. Moses has another water trick up his sleeve, turning the bitterness sweet so they could drink.

In our reading this morning, in response to their cries of hunger, God promises to “rain bread from heaven” – and instructs Moses to instruct the people to gather ONLY enough for that day. Only enough for EACH day. And this includes instruction for

keeping the Sabbath BEFORE Sabbath-keeping gets institutionalized as the third of Moses' Ten Commandments!

Gather twice as much on the sixth day so they can rest on the seventh – as God did in creation.

And sure enough, in the evening the quails show up. And in the morning, on “the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.” It looked like snow. Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann calls it “wonder bread,” but the Israelites had no idea what it was – which, in a comic twist, is where the name ‘manna’ comes from. The Hebrew ‘*man hu*’ is their question, “What is it?” I picture a young child at the dinner table, “Ewwwww, what is it? I'm not eating that!”

But the Israelites are desperate in the wilderness, so they'll try anything. Moses relays God's instruction, to gather as much as they need for each day – and as much as their families need. And they did; or, at least most of them did. The instruction included a provision about not letting any of the so-called manna that was gathered go to waste. But some of the Israelites ignore that instruction, putting part of it aside – presumably afraid there won't be any more the next morning as God has promised.

They do not trust the instruction. They do not trust the promise that there will be enough. Again, you can't blame them. You may or may not know what it's like to worry if there will be enough food on the table for yourself or your family; that's something no one should have to endure, and yet so many do. But in one way or another, physically, mentally, spiritually, we all know what it's like to worry that there won't be enough. To believe, deep down, that there IS not enough.

So the part they left goes to waste, melting in the sun.

On the sixth day they're reminded to gather twice as much, in this case with additional instruction to bake and boil the leftovers so they'll still be good the next day, the seventh day. So they can settle into the restful, renewing rhythm of creation itself.

But some of them go out on the seventh day anyway. Maybe because they let their sixth-day leftovers go to waste? Maybe because they wanted to store up even more for the next day? We don't know. The text doesn't tell us, but either way, there is no trust. Only fear. Fear, in the midst of wilderness uncertainty and insecurity, that there will not be enough the next day. When the shelves are bare every night, it's hard to trust that they won't still be bare the next morning.

And so the story continues with the Israelites. They eventually live out this daily lesson, receiving and gathering and eating manna and quail – ENOUGH – for 40 more years. Until they reach the promised land.

And so also the story continues with us. We ARE the Israelites, whether we want to admit it or not. Just like we are the disciples from last week's story, both susceptible to the myth of scarcity and wide open to the promise, and ready to enable the fulfillment, of abundance. We know at least some of the Israelites' vulnerability. We know what it is to feel joy one day and despair the next. We are prone to complaining. We are prone to anxiety and fear. And we know what happens when anxiety and fear creep in, drive the car. When we are anxious and fearful in the wilderness, face-to-face with uncertainty, with so much is out of our control. It's not pretty.

Thich Nhat Hanh, he with a Buddhist's heart for mindfulness, reminds us that "Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future." When we don't trust that there is enough, that we have enough, that we are enough, we get stuck in the past, derailed by it, weighted down by regret or guilt or shame or blame or anger or hatred or depression. Or like the Israelites, we may long for and even try somehow to return to some romanticized notion of our past. Or simply long for the devil we know.

Whether we mean to or not, we become increasingly self-absorbed.

When we don't trust that there is enough, that we have enough, that we are enough, we get preoccupied with the future. We try to exert control where, in fact, we have none. We worry, and so we plan. Like the Israelites, we hoard. We gamble. We bounce,

looking for greener grass somewhere else. We store up treasures for ourselves and find, as Jesus remind us, that our hearts have been stored up too.

Whether we mean to or not, we become increasingly self-centered.

“So do not worry about tomorrow,” Jesus also says, “for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” Enough for today.

But either way, past or future, we lose sight of the present. That's the point. We lose hold of the day right in front of us. The gifts right in front of us. The needs right in front of us. The people right in front of us. Creation right in front of us.

Full of fear, whether we are conscious of it or not, we are more likely to embrace the myth of scarcity, to be defensive and protective, and live small. Less likely to embrace the promise of abundance, to be generous and compassionate, and live big. It can be a vicious and life-stifling cycle. It is a vicious cycle.

We rarely know what it is to gather enough for this day. What is that like? What would that mean? Just enough for this day. God says, as this story reminds us: I will give you enough for today, even if you don't recognize it. Even if it's not what you expected. Even if and when you find yourself in the wilderness like the Israelites.

Brueggemann writes: “‘Wilderness’ is a place, in biblical rhetoric, where there are no viable life support systems. ‘Grace’ is the occupying generosity of God that redefines the place. The wonder bread, as a gesture of divine grace, re-characterizes the wilderness that Israel now discovered to be a place of viable life, made viable by the generous inclination of YHWH.”

Manna is God's grace. Manna is enough, and to be clear, not some romanticized notion of what enough looks or feels like. It's just enough.

The story of manna and quail came to Amy when she was pregnant with Gabe. Wrestling with the inevitable anxiety – and yes, fear – typical of new parents, mindful of everything she didn't know, anticipating everything that could go wrong, various women in her life reassured her that she was enough for Gabe. That she had everything

she needed for Gabe. She wrote it down and stuck it to the mirror in our bedroom, a steady reminder for both of us that enough was enough. That enough is enough.

She often references the story of manna and quail in her work with hospice patients, their families, their caregivers. Wrestling as they do with fears of death and dying, pain and discomfort, loss and loneliness, she gently reminds them not to get ahead of themselves or each other. Or fall behind. To consider what enough might look like for that day. Just for that day.

Manna and quail has also been a guiding touchstone through Amy's cancer journey this past year. Fear and anxiety feels impossible to avoid when you're diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening illness. It's hard not to look to the past, BEFORE cancer, or worry for the worst-case scenario the future might bring with it. But manna and quail kept showing up for her in ways expected and unexpected. That grace of God, the love of God, made present in the form of homemade and store-bought meals. Fresh-picked flowers. Playlists. Prayers, calls, texts, emails, visits. She covered one of our bedroom walls with cards, children's artwork, cartoons. Much of that from you all. One day at a time, enough was enough. Enough is enough. And we are so grateful.

Friends, enough is enough for today. That's the Divine assurance. And yet, and YET, we live in a world of perpetual wilderness where so many do NOT have enough of what they need even to survive, much less thrive, in mind, body or spirit. That is our collective doing, of course, a symptom of widespread fear of one kind or another. Fear that drives and serves to justify poverty and hunger and homelessness and violence. Fear that drives and serves to justify racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia. It's a vicious cycle, and the prophetic truth is that love alone interrupts the cycle. Love alone casts out our fear and softens hearts, enables healing and reconciliation, changes minds and policies, dismantles unjust institutions and systems. As the Sikh activist and organizer Valerie Kaur powerfully insists, that's not naïve, it's revolutionary.

And it's rooted in the power of manna and quail. We get ourselves and each other and the earth in trouble when we let fear take root and call the shots. The fear that there is not enough to go around, that there will not be enough tomorrow, that we were or are

not enough. Manna and quail calls us to name and cast out the fear that disorients us, that routes us away from the common good. In God's kin-dom, the question of what is enough cannot be answered in isolation. What is enough MUST be enough for all.

In that spirit, let me close now with the same prayer we shared as we breathed our way into worship – again, from Walter Brueggemann:

We are strange mixtures of loss and hope.

As we are able, we submit our losses to you.

We know about sickness and dying,

about death and mortality,

about failure and disappointment.

And now for a moment we do our

failing and our dying in your presence,

you who attend to us in loss.

As we are able, we submit our hopes to you.

We know about self-focused fantasy

and notions of control.

But we also know that our futures

are out beyond us,

held in your good hand.

Our hopes are filled with promises of

well-being, justice, and mercy.

Move us this day beyond our fears and anxieties

into your land of goodness.

We wait for your coming,

we pray for your kingdom.

In the meantime, give us bread for the day.

Enough is enough. May it be so, for all of us.