

“DAILY BREAD”
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16
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In older versions of the Bible, the word used for the Israelites’ state of being six weeks into their wilderness journey was not the “complaining” we heard today, but rather “murmuring.” The text reads, “And the whole congregation of the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron.” I’m sure that the translators of the NRSV thought that they were making things clearer by changing the word to “complained,” but the Hebrew word is, in fact, “murmur”; and murmuring is really not the same thing as complaining. There is a world of nuance between the two. “Complaining” is specific and focused. “Murmuring,” well that’s something else entirely. Can’t you hear it, people shifting their weight from foot to foot uneasily, talking behind their hands. A kind of miasma of uncertainty and diffuse anxiety hovering over the camp; faces watchful and unsettled picked out by the light of a hundred cook fires. The Israelites had left the daily weight of their slavery in Egypt far enough behind them that it no longer seemed so fearsome. But ahead of them lay the vastness of the wilderness, a journey of undetermined length to nowhere they knew, and apprehension grew with each fall of night and each day’s journey into uncharted territory . And so the people murmured against Moses and Aaron.

I think that most of us would be quick to recognize the Hebrew murmuring because that same weighty unquiet seems to lie over our land as well, really more now than at any time in my adult life. Housing market slides, the federal government deciding which banks and insurance companies to bail out and which to let go, a war that grinds on and on and on without either an end in sight or a noticeable decrease in our perception of threat, natural disaster after natural disaster. Earlier this week, I spoke with a friend, an HP employee, who will find out in the next two weeks if he still has a job. It’s the fourth time in as many years that he’s been in this position. Yesterday, I went to my bank, Washington Mutual, which has been much in the news lately. An elderly woman asked the counter teller in a shaking voice that carried way too clearly, “Is my money safe here?” and immediately a senior staff person took the woman aside and began speaking to her in low, reassuring tones while in the wait line, customers studiously avoided eye contact and stared at the floor. These are murmuring times in which we find ourselves.

What’s interesting about the Israelites’ murmuring about food is that they left Egypt with all their flocks and herds and wagonloads of grain, or so the writers of Exodus tell us. Those who know biblical geography tell us that the land they had passed through thus far would have offered them new stores of fruit, honey, nuts and herbs. There was food in the camp, but they didn’t want to use it. They were afraid, afraid they might not have enough.

Now if there is one most slippery word in the English language, it is this word “enough.” What is enough? And how do we know when we have it? It’s interesting to me that the question of enough is the first theological crisis that faced the Israelites on their journey out of slavery and into freedom. And still today, some 4,000 years later, many would argue that it’s still the most important theological issue before us. All week long, as I’ve thought about what I might say this morning, two contrasting images have played over and over in the theater of my mind. The first occurred just a few weeks ago. I was on my way to the hospital for an early morning surgery. I went to the 9th St. Starbucks, the one right around the corner from Bed, Bath, and Beyond, at about 7:00 a.m. to get my morning coffee fix. All the spaces in front of Starbucks and about half the Bed, Bath, and Beyond parking lot were filled, and there was a line that stretched halfway around that little shopping center. Well, it turns out that this was the day that the new i-phone was coming out and people had started lining up at the AT&T store just after 6:00 a.m. to be the first to get one.

The second image comes from a trip I took about 10 years ago when I was Conference Moderator. I had the opportunity to go to San Diego and Tijuana to study border issues. One of our hosts in Mexico was a Catholic priest who ran a border hospitality house called the Casa de Migrantes. The house provided food, shelter, and clothing for residents who could be there a matter of many months looking for a way to come north. The priests and brothers who ran the house dressed, like the residents, out of the boxes of charity clothes that came as gifts from church members. Father Tomas, our host, was dressed the two days we saw him in a pair of old jeans cinched up with a rope belt, as they were too big around the waist and about two inches too short. One by one, various well-meaning members of our delegation went up to him and offered to buy him a new pair of jeans that fit. The second night, at our reflection session, he brought up the offers of aid. "I know it was meant in kindness," he told us, "but after all, one pair of pants is very much like another." There's a shocking statement. One pair of pants is very much like another. One phone is very much like another as well, but I don't think that those in the queue in front of the AT and T store were thinking that.

Six weeks into their desert wandering, we are brought to see that there was more that enslaved the people of Israel than the chariots and horsemen of Pharaoh. Their happiness, their sense of security, their well-being was dependent on having more than they needed, more than was enough. Again, it's interesting how little has changed. I would argue this morning that by biblical standards, we also are enslaved by our hunger for more, and newer and bigger, and better and faster. And I know enslavement is a strong word; but by the terms of Exodus, the whole book of Exodus, slavery is anything that reduces the possibility of right community, anything that initiates false or immoral power relationships, anything that stands in the way of our children and our children's children to freely choose their own future. How much is enough? And how do we know when we have it? It should not be news to any of us that how we answer this question directly impacts questions of environmental sustainability, of energy dependence versus independence, issues of war and peace. What is enough and how do we know when we have it directly impacts questions of investment return, debt, consumer credit, bad mortgages, and the financial vulnerability that has set so many to murmuring in these days. What is enough for you? And how do you still that persistent voice in your head that cries "I want, I want, I want" far out of proportion to what is wise, or what is safe, or what truly reflects your priorities and values.

It is such an important question for us to grapple with as individuals. In the 1960s and 70s, it became theologically fashionable in the liberal church to blame all our problems on corporate sin, corporate in the sense of "group" not just corporations, though multi-national corporations were certainly one focus. And though I do not want to let our corporate leaders off the hook, I would agree with Walter Bruggeman when he insisted that corporate sin has its root in individual sin. They won't sell if we won't buy. Whether it be manufacturing moving to third world countries with loose environmental standards and low wages because we want cheaper stuff, or credit extended to uncredit-worthy consumers because we want our stuff now, or a war that feeds on fear, ignorance, and racism: when we parcel out blame, we need to look inward as well as outward and acknowledge our individual complicity.

When the people of Israel murmured about food, God gave them the gift of the manna. Some in our Tuesday lectionary class, as well as a variety of commentators through the ages, found this problematic. Why do the people get rewarded for whining? Could you not interpret today's lesson to be, "Complain and God will give you more!" But there are several important characteristics about this manna that dictate the focus of its teaching. This bizarre flake-like substance came every morning and only lasted the day. Everyone got it, the same food, sufficient for that day's needs. This food was not a determiner of social, political, or economic status. It could not be hoarded, sold, traded, or otherwise used to change the balance of power in the community. Each day, as each family gathered it, it gave them the opportunity to reflect on where they had come from, who had brought them here, whose they were, and what was simply enough. The manna, daily bread, was both gift and discipline; food for the body and food for the soul. It is most likely not our lot to wander with God alone in the wilderness for 40 years to learn to cast off our

enslavements. We struggle with them in the context of busy, challenging lives. But I don't think the lesson of the Hebrews' daily bread is entirely irrelevant for us. The faith that sees all life as a gift from God is a discipline, not something that comes to us naturally; the same is true when it comes to reigning in the least helpful of our desires. We need to work at it day to day, like exercise or any other discipline that enhances our lives. We don't gather our food every morning like the Israelites, but we do eat. It is one opportunity every day to be truly mindful and thankful for the gift of daily bread; it can be a moment to refocus our attention. What do we really value? How do we want to live? What do we say "yes" to and what do we say "no" to to help us along the way? Who do we belong to and what does that say about "enough?" The life journey of the people of God is always the journey away from enslavement and into the freedom of living according to our deepest choices. And the promise of God is that God will provide always bread for the journey and will accompany us on our way. Thanks be to God. Amen.