

“Bread From Heaven”  
Exodus 16:1-21  
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

This morning we are focusing on an important passage from the book of Exodus, the story of the people of Israel beginning their wanderings in the wilderness for 40 years. This past week in the [Lent in Plain Sight](#) devotion book by Jill Duffield, the theme has been bread. And as you will soon see, bread from heaven plays an important part in this story from Exodus. In Jill’s book of daily devotions we read not only the Bible and pray, but we are also invited to focus on 10 ordinary objects - like bread and coins, shoes and towels, dust and oil. Jill writes, “God works through the ordinary... Ordinary people, everyday objects, things we bump up against moment by moment” (p. 1) During this season of spiritual preparation before Easter, my sermons will be guided by the scriptures as well as these ordinary objects. If you are able to read the book and participate in our weekly study on Wednesdays, great; if not, don’t worry - I believe God is able to speak to us in many ways.

(Read [Exodus 16:1-21](#))

As you may know, last Saturday night a group of us participated in a friendly game of Zoom trivia. As you might expect the categories included sports and entertainment, literature and history, and random questions such as “What are the two things people are most afraid of?” Who knew that fear of heights and fear of clowns would be the answers?! And yes, since we are a church, there was a section on Bible trivia. Did you know that there are 39 books in the Old Testament? (Don’t worry - I don’t think any of the participants did either!) The Bible is a big book, actually a collection of lots of smaller books put together - and it’s easy to get lost in all the details. Sometimes it’s important to step back and look at the big picture, to look at the larger narrative of what’s happening with God and the chosen people of Israel, and how from that story we come to understand the Good News we read in the New Testament of Jesus coming to us as the Messiah, God’s Son and chosen messenger. The story of the Hebrew people begins with slavery in Egypt. In their oppression and misery in Egypt, working for Pharaoh to build his empire, God hears their cries, and through the unlikely hero named Moses, God delivers them. Through the parting of the Red Sea they make an exodus out of Egypt and God is victorious over Pharaoh’s army - horse and rider are thrown into the sea, while the Israelites walk on dry land (Exodus 15.21). With Moses and his assistant Aaron leading the way, the people begin their journey to the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. If you have ever seen the old movie with [Charlton Heston playing Moses](#), or Pixar’s [The Prince of Egypt](#), you know something about this great drama out of Egypt and towards the promised land!

But when we get to the 16th chapter of the book of Exodus, the story takes an unexpected and unpleasant turn. Only two and a half months into their journey into the wilderness, the people begin to complain and mount an insurrection against their leaders, and by default, a rebellion against God. They discover that the wilderness is a hard place, a place that lacks the basic necessities of life. Just 2 ½ months into their journey, the people simply have a meltdown, and so they complain to Moses and Aaron: “Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were in Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread.

Instead, you've brought us out into this desert to starve... to death" (16.3). Instead of trusting in the God who delivered them from the hands of slavery, from the oppression of Pharaoh, from the army that chased them across the Red Sea, the Israelites are in despair. "We would have been better off in Egypt - at least there we knew we would be fed, we had the security of having meat and bread! But look at us now!"

This theme of the people complaining, being tested in the wilderness for 40 years on their way to the promised land - this scene gets repeated time and time again in the scriptures. And years later, when Israel is taken away to Babylon as exiles, the time of testing will continue. Will they be able to trust in the One who is their Savior and their Redeemer, or will they give up on faith and throw in the towel? In the larger story of the Bible, this movement from slavery to freedom always takes us through the wilderness - the place where the people have nothing left to count on but God.

*But I believe what is remarkable about this passage is not the fact that the people complained. In fact, the scriptures are full of examples of people of faith crying out to God about their complaints. No, what is remarkable is the amazing good news that God listened!* Time and time again we are told that God hears their cries, and then God graciously acts to provide for their needs. "At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God" (16.12). Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that Israel is not rebuked for their anxiety, nor are they required to repent of their yearning to get their needs met in Egypt (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1, pp. 812-813). Instead, God hears their cries and meets their needs in a new way. God provides them bread from heaven in the morning, and quail at night - just enough for everyone to be fed. The instructions are made clear that the people are not to take more than they need, or save some for the next day. Instead, they are invited to trust in the Lord's provision, to count on God for their daily sustenance. "Give us this day our daily bread." But when the people failed to listen and took more than they needed, the food became infested with worms and stank. In this way the people were invited to trust in God for their daily bread, including a provision to rest on the sabbath. So instead of the desert being a barren place of fear and anxiety, God shows up. "The glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud" (16.10) and the people were given proof that indeed the Lord provides.

I wonder if you have experienced wilderness moments in your life? A time when you were cut off from the security you once knew, a time when you were in a new situation not necessarily of your own choosing - a time when you could not count on old securities, a time when you may have been mad with God or wished you could get back to the "way things were"? As a pastor I have seen people enter into the wilderness after a sudden death of a loved one; or when a relationship with a long time friend or partner comes to an end; or when you receive a diagnosis from the doctor that rocks your world. Wilderness times are sometimes called liminal spaces, the times in our lives when we are in transition, when we are dislocated from the things that previously gave us security; when we are on the threshold of two realities. In our story from Exodus we see the Israelites are no longer slaves in Egypt, they were set free - they were on the way to the Promised Land but they were not there yet.

In many ways we all have been living in the wilderness during this last year of the pandemic; so much of what we could count on has been interrupted; we have had to let go of so many of the

ties that bind us together; so many have suffered financial hardships and unemployment, and hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost - brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and grandparents, many whom have died alone.

Several years ago I found myself in a wilderness time of my own. Having spent many years serving as an associate pastor at one church, I felt like I had given my all to the congregation, but I did not know what was next for me. Though I knew it was time for me to move on, I did not have a clear idea of what God was calling me to do next. So I took part in a chaplaincy program at the VA hospital, an opportunity to grow in my pastoral skills as well as in my ability to discern God's direction. An opportunity to work at a small non-profit called Asheville Youth Mission presented itself, and I was blessed to be able to use my skills and community connections in this vital ministry. I enjoyed the work, but I wondered if this was truly my calling.

This time of wilderness questioning and doubting, wondering and discerning - this was not easy. I know a lot of people have gone through similar struggles, but honestly it was not fun. *I share this with you not because I think my story is unique but because I have become convinced that it is through such wilderness experiences that our faith really grows.* In the wilderness we come face to face with our anxieties, our insecurities - we may even cry out to God wondering why we are in the situation to begin with! Wouldn't things be better back in Egypt where at least we knew we had work and food, where we could depend on ourselves and old ways of doing things? But here in the wilderness, where things are not so secure, we find ourselves in a position to trust God more. We are more likely to depend on God in the wilderness, because in the wilderness God is the only one who can provide. There are no fast food restaurants, there's no uber-eats to deliver us food. No, our only option in the wilderness is to turn to the Lord for our daily bread. The only way to overcome anxiety is to trust fully in the generosity of the God who shows up in the wilderness.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. I am the bread that has come down from heaven. If you want to be full, trust in me."

The temptation we face is to turn back towards what is familiar, to what we know back in Egypt, but that is not the direction of faith. When the crowds come to Jesus and need to be fed, the disciples want to send them away. "There's not enough here to feed everyone - let's send them home so they can get food for themselves." While the disciples view the world through the lens of scarcity, Jesus invites us to abundance. Loaves taken and broken, fish multiplied - all shared with those who are in the wilderness. And there's enough for all, even 12 baskets left over!

I know that in many ways our congregation has also been in a place of wilderness, too. During the two year pastoral transition you were discerning where God was calling us next. On top of that, this past year we all have been living in the pandemic, another liminal time. Some of you have asked me: How are we to grow our church when we are not able to gather? How can we practice hospitality and engage fully in mission when opportunities are limited? Though we are seeing hope with more of us receiving vaccines, this time of pandemic-wilderness will not end overnight. *Yes, the wilderness time of waiting has presented us with challenges, but here's the good news! I believe God is calling us to embrace this time of extended transition as an opportunity for us to deepen our trust in God's generosity.* As Jill Duffield has reminded us this week, God invites us to cast our bread upon the water. In hopeful assurance that God provides

and sustains, “We must be willing to throw our bread on the water even when we do not have any idea how it will come back to us....Daily, diligently, we are called to ask ourselves: Of what do I need to let go of in faithfulness and for the sake of the gospel?” (Duffield, p. 29) For me, I am being called to let go of anxiety, and instead to trust deeply in God’s call and provision in my life, and hopefully work with you all to live into the future God has in store for us. I honestly don’t know what that future looks like but I know that God promises to be with us every step of the way.

Of what do you need to let go of in faithfulness and for the sake of the gospel? No one can answer that question but you, but know that the God of generosity is the one who shows up in the wilderness. And it is only through our daily trust in the Lord that we can be fed.

To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.