

“What Is It?”

Exodus 16: 1-5, 13-17

Have you ever planned a trip where something went wrong? Even after you read the guidebooks, packed carefully made sure you had extra supplies, still something happened you didn't anticipate. You guess wrong. Your luggage was lost. You miss a connection. Every trip I've ever taken has included detours, false starts, confusing moments. Yet, some of those surprises turned out to be gifts in the end. Those setbacks or close calls proved to be the making of the whole experience. Years later, it wasn't the careful planning you relished, but the struggles that bonded you, the fears that set the stage for courage, the mishaps that called for your grit. In the end, the trip was enhanced by the unplanned moments as much as the planned ones.

This fall we're looking at the Hebrews' journey to the Promised Land. It's a journey that shapes and defines these people. It's a journey that deepens their faith. But it is not an easy trail. And it's not the smooth parts the Bible emphasizes.

The Hebrews in our story are runaway slaves who have left Egypt some weeks before. A motley crew of all ages, they avoid the main caravan routes and take an obscure route through the wilderness. When we meet them in this passage, they've gone about 150 miles on foot. They're several weeks out of Egypt and have eaten through everything they brought with them.

That's when things start to unravel. Blisters gnaw into their feet and hunger eats at their stomachs. So, they pummel Moses with an old refrain. Why are we doing this? Why have we come here into a wilderness with no food when we had cooking pots filled with stewed meat every day back home. They're former slaves; yet they regret the whole thing. They grumble like kids in the back seat – Are we there yet? We're hungry. Moses keeps encouraging them, but he's starting to worry himself as the grumbling grows louder.

Then something happens that no one anticipated. They find this rough flakey moss on the ground in the morning. Bulbous mushrooms-like stuff that scholars speculate was the sap of the tamarisk tree. But someone in the crowd was hungry enough to try it. Soon they saw that it was good and filled their baskets with the stuff. No one understood this miracle – what the substance was or why it was there, or who sent it? They were bewildered, so much that they named the food manna – which wasn't a noun but a question. It translates, “What is this stuff you are feeding us?”

This is a turning point in the journey because these Hebrews start to wonder. What just happened? It seems too much of a coincidence. They were complaining and this stuff suddenly appeared. Who sent this? Did someone hear us? They get no answer but the wind howling across the sand. Yet they keep asking questions, which tells us they are beginning to learn something new. Let's take a closer look. Let's see what they're learning and what we can learn too.

In the first place, this story says, you need to relax. When the people get hungry their anxiety increases. That's when they fantasize about the fleshpots they left behind. They exaggerate those fleshpots. They were slaves; they were dirt poor. The more they give voice to their worries, the worse it seems. Worries are like a virus. They are contagious. Anxiety takes up a lot of energy. But the Bible says it is wasted energy.” The manna appeared every morning sufficient to the day. It was enough, and the people had to learn to stay in the moment.

Corrie Ten Boom provided shelter for Jews living in Holland during World War II. Eventually discovered, her house was raided and Ten Boom sent to a Nazi concentration camp. She wrote a wonderful book about her experience called The Hiding Place. What helped her survive this ordeal was the fundamental core of faith at the center of who she was. She writes about how she handled anxiety, “Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength- carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.”

I saw something on Facebook that said, “Next week was exhausting.” It's so easy to anticipate problems but what a slippery slope. If you allow your worries to move into your head and set up camp, they will grow. If you give real estate to your anxiety, then you eliminate all possibility of living in the beauty of this very moment now.

Sometimes we all need to stop fretting and gather the manna for this day, without worrying about tomorrow. We need to enjoy what God has provided and quiet all the anxious voices in us. God's hoping that like the Hebrews we'll find that the provisions of each day are sufficient to our needs. God's hoping we'll begin to allow tomorrow to take care of itself.

Secondly, the story says that God offers us abundance. The found manna every morning and God sent flocks of quails each night. Now, some folks still had trouble seeing the abundance in this trek through the wilderness to an unknown land. But the Bible says God “rained down” food upon them. God did not put them on a subsistence diet. This was no wilderness diet of locusts. God fed them generously. One of the first lessons of faith is learning to appreciate the gifts we've been given. That's true on all of life's journeys. As we make our way on this interim trail we are taking together, we'll be blessed by the voices among us who see the gifts of this journey and recognize God's good hand in it all.

Some Hebrews, like some people everywhere, weren't satisfied they'd have enough. So, they tried to stockpile this manna. But manna does not keep well. It rots in the bags and stinks up the tents. Here in this simple story the Bible reminds us that hoarding is a problem. It hooks us when we buy the myth of scarcity. When you look out and see only what you lack instead of all that comes from God's good hand then you are missing the point of life.

Finally, the story says we need to trust God. Building a relationship takes time. Building one with someone you cannot see, takes longer. But in time they grew to rely on God to feed them. At first, they scrambled to fill their sacks. But then they learned to trust in this providence. They started to know it would be there.

Over time, as they sat back with full bellies, they remembered that Someone had called Moses. Someone sent plagues. Someone parted the Sea of Reeds. Someone sent a cloud to guide them by day and a blazing star each night.

It takes time to trust God. Often trust comes through life's hardest journeys. As you reflect on a close call, the gifts you did not earn, the grace you did not see coming. It's easy to complain, but wisdom comes when you reflect on your journey and see you are not alone.

One afternoon on a trip with my parents, my dad suggested we go sailing. We'd both sailed before but neither of us had done it in a long time. We rented a boat and were a little embarrassed as we fumbled in our attempts to get it out of the harbor. We never actually hit another boat but there

were a couple of narrow misses. So, I looked at Dad and asked, “What do you think? Can we handle this? Should we turn back?” He said something that he often said. “We’ve come this far. Let’s thank God and take courage.” Growing up in the depression, that was the tagline for life. Things may have been rough, but I’ve made it this far. I’m grateful to God and I look to the future with courage. It was more than a philosophy; it was a form of faith. He told me we are not in this alone, and we can trust the one who is in this boat of life with us.

When you can look back and see how far you’ve come, and thank God, it shifts your perspective. You are not worried about getting everything perfect. You’re intrigued by the adventure. When you start by thanking God for how far you have come you make peace with all the problems along the way. There will be times when you cannot control the winds assailing your boat, or all you can do is hold on to hold onto God’s coattails for dear life, but in those moments, you can choose to set your sails by faith’s compass and press on.

Let us pray: Help us to remember the lessons of the manna, to trust in prayer, and see all the signs of your gracious hand in our lives, too.

Amen.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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