

August 2, 2015

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Exodus 16:1-4, 9-15

What Is It?

When my husband and I lived in Tanzania, we were recipients of numerous gifts of food. Wherever we traveled, whether touring a specific place or program, or just stopping by someone's house, we were always welcomed, so very warmly, with gifts of food. Perhaps you, too, have travelled to other countries, particularly developing countries, and been awed by the welcome, by the generosity extended. In Tanzania, you would be invited inside and given the nicest possible seat in the nicest possible gathering area. You'd be guided to hold your hands over a basin, and a pitcher of warm water would be poured over your hands, so that you could wash them. Then you would be served refreshments, choice treats. The beverage was often glass-bottled Coca-cola (warm), or hot tea (very sweet). There was usually something to nibble on, too, peanuts, or small cakes, or a Tanzanian type of donut. I have a specifically sensory memory of one visit and the treats we received. For the beverage, we were served hot tea. For the munchie we were each given a small plate with several bite-sized dark, square-like shapes on it...quite a few of them per plate. I thought perhaps they were gingerbread. I was hungry. I popped one in my mouth. Liver. And then I looked at a plate of a dozen more pieces offered to me by my host...

Maybe I should have first asked, "What is it?" That's the question the Israelites ask today, in the first reading from the book of Exodus, a question about a white, flake-like substance on the ground, a kind of food that they will eat. "What is it?" We pick up in the Exodus narrative after the Israelites have been led out of slavery in Egypt. The story of their exit, their liberation from oppression, is a seminal moment in Jewish history, something to mark and celebrate, which they do, with Passover, a meal that is done in remembrance of that. Passover becomes a seminal moment in Christian history as well. It was during the celebration of Passover that Jesus gathered together with his disciples in an upper room. It was in that context of liberation, and on the night in which he was betrayed, that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, a meal in remembrance of liberation.

What is it? It's bread and wine. (There's a restaurant named that, just down Irving Park Road, Bread and Wine. They could have named it Communion. That's my husband's joke.) Sometimes, when celebrating Holy Communion, instead of or in addition to wine there's grape juice. Sometimes, when celebrating Holy Communion, instead of or in addition to bread, there's these thin little wafers, white flake-like things...like that substance that the Israelites found...

They needed food. They had left Egypt, led by Moses and Aaron, and they spend some time traveling. They're touring around a country that's foreign to them, a country called freedom. It's a strange and wondrous place, the wilderness of freedom, but it's challenging, too. It can be difficult to live in the liberation of possibilities, all that possibility asks of personal agency. And the Israelites start to complain. Freedom can prompt that. So can travelling. Perhaps you, too, have had traveler's complaints. Perhaps you've had them while in a foreign country, while touring with a group, there's always at least one complainer. The itinerary makes no sense. The leaders are lousy. The food is no good. In the wilderness, the Israelites had all these complaints, all of them—itinerary, leadership, food—and all of them had them, the reading from Exodus says, the whole congregation. Verse two says that the whole congregation complained. (This verse makes me a little nervous, "The whole congregation complained... against Aaron...Aaron, Erin... different spelling.)

The whole congregation of the Israelites complain that wilderness is hard, and that they

are hungry. I get those complaints. I have them too. Freedom is scary, all its unknowns, and dangers. Freedom is scary, especially when you're not sure about resources, when your next meal is yet to be determined, when the future feels so precarious. At times like that, memories of the past can exert a powerful pull, a powerful and unhelpful pull. Of course, it's possible the nostalgia is misplaced, at least by the Israelites. While it's a satisfyingly sensuous phrase, that they "sat by the fleshpots of Egypt and ate our fill of bread." one questions the veracity of the claim. Remember, they were slaves in Egypt. And while we're being in honest, we should also acknowledge that these grumbling travelers of Exodus do air their complaints with a fair amount attitude: "You brought us out here to die!"

Still, God hears it. In this, in this story, as in many of the psalms, especially the psalms, or prayers, or songs known as psalms of lament, the Bible gives us all all kinds of permission to bring our concerns to God, all our complaints. Bring them. God can handle attitude. God hears the Israelite's complaint, and responds to it—with a little attitude of his own: "I'm going to rain bread from heaven for you!"

Then it is that God sends that fine, white flakey substance, something like frost, the Bible says, an edible substance that is on the ground. The Israelites see it and say, "What is it"? In Hebrew, the original language of the book of Exodus, this is the way you say, "What is it?" This is the way the words for that question, "What it it?" sound: "Man hu?" Manna—the question is the word that came to be used for what they found. As the preacher Craig Barnes says, you might imagine the Israelites out collecting it, coming back to camp and serving it on a plate. Those being served say, "What is it?" and the hosts say, "Yeah."

Manna is a strange thing. Happily, it's less like liver than (as another theologian has whimsically described it) frosted flakes. (You know the old commercial with Tony the Tiger and frosted flakes... "They're great!") Manna is. As described in Exodus, manna is a wondrous thing. In the middle verses that today's reading skips and in the verses afterwards there are fascinating additional details about manna and what it is: how much a person should collect each day, how for larger households and for smaller households, there's enough, just enough and no more. Also, it will spoil if you try to be sneaky with it. You can't be selfish about it. But it's reliable, manna is, reliable as the dawn, it's something given on a daily basis, manna, it's daily bread—except for the Sabbath day, in which case you collect twice as much the day before but then it won't spoil. It's a wondrous thing, manna. What is it, but a miraculous picture and sign of grace: how it comes from the heavens, offered to all, in response to human need, grace: sufficient and expansive, freely and regularly given, not to be hoarded.

"Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness," the people say to Jesus in John 6, in the narrative context of the story that chapter that occurs during the celebration of Passover. "Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness." Jesus says, "God gave you that bread, that grace, God gave it to you, and still gives it." It is him. He is that bread, he is the miraculous picture, the ultimate sign, of grace. Just as in Exodus, where God responds to a people, full of complaints, and attitude, so also in the gospel, Jesus responds to people who are testy, and self-righteous, and seeking signs. God responds to people who are full of questions: "When did you come? What must we do? What work will you perform?". In Jesus, God comes to us, with all our questions, and asks us a question, "What is it?"

Do you know the grace of someone asking you that? "What is it?" When you are upset, when you feel completely empty, hungry, lost, in a land unknown, when you are unsure of anything but that there is nothing good to come, and someone comes to you and asks, "What is it?" That is the love God shows us in Jesus, the bread from heaven, who knows our needs, knows our questions, travelled to be with us and feed us. He is the host, offering us, grace, abundant, and sweet.