

## **“Bread from Heaven”**

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on September 18, 2011

Texts: Exodus 16:2-15

The Israelites were now a free people. They saw the mighty hand of God at work, freeing them and leading and guiding them. They crossed the Red Sea, not swimming, but walking through it, on dry ground! Pharaoh's army was no longer in their pursuit. They were now truly a free people!

Yet, they were still on a journey. They were going somewhere, but they were not there yet, and they were not sure yet, either. The Promised Land was not in sight. And they did not know exactly where or how far away it was. How nice it would have been if the exodus, or the exit from the land of bondage, led them directly to the land of milk and honey! How nice it would have been if freedom led them directly to well-being and prosperity! But, it rarely works that way, does it? Freedom led them directly, not to the land of milk and honey, but to the wilderness, an uncertain, troubling, and anxious place. The Israelites were now a free people, but still wandering, somewhere between Egypt and the Promised Land, somewhere between bondage and well-being.

Our first lesson begins with the entire company of Israel complaining to their leaders, Moses and Aaron. *"If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."* The issue is food. They remember the well-stocked cook-pots they had in Egypt. They long for the bread and meat they had back there, and they wish they had never left.

We understand. Life in the wilderness must not have been easy. My youngest son did a wilderness hiking trip recently. For eight days, my son and his team members lived on canned or dried food. No vegetables, no fruit. No toilet paper, and no showers, either. Yet, they still had a great time. It was a great experience. But, you know, they knew that it was for eight days only. And, they knew what was waiting for them at the end of those eight days.

But, for the Israelites, it was not exactly a hiking trip. They knew that their destination was the Promised Land. But, they could not see it. Six weeks into their journey out of Egypt, they were there, in the middle of nowhere, in a barren wilderness. For how long? They did not know. Where exactly were they going? They did not know. In our text today, we hear them complain about food, but I do not think that food was the only issue. They were afraid. They were fearful, of the lack of food and other necessities of life, of course, but also, and most importantly, of the uncertain future. The real issue, in my opinion, was not the lack of resources, but the lack of trust, the lack of faith, or anxiety.

Anxiety affects us in many strange ways, does it not? You heard Israelites reminiscing about Egypt. Listening to them talking, you would have thought that they had smorgasbord every day! Anxiety distorts memory. Egypt was the place of bondage and oppression. They were treated badly. They were abused. They were exploited. Yet, in their great anxiety, the Israelites do not remember any of these, only meat and bread, the

smorgasbord! Egypt, the house of bondage, Egypt, the land of death, is now remembered as a vacation resort.

Anxiety plays a trick on us, on our mind, on our attitude, on our spirit. It distorts memory. It distorts perception. It distorts our hearing, our vision, our judgment. *“This is not the gig we signed up for,”* grumbled the Israelites, pointing the finger at Moses and Aaron, their leaders, *“If you want to, you can go on, but we are going back. We are going back to Egypt, to Pharaoh’s bread and meat.”*

Some of you may find the situation a bit distant. We certainly are not fleeing ex-slaves, wandering in the wilderness, faced with difficulties of survival. But I am sure that many of you can relate to the story. Leaving the past behind, you decide to move forward. You are eager to begin a new chapter in your life. You dream of new possibilities, a new future, a bright future. So, you take the step. You get on the road. You embark on a journey toward a new life. But, alas! You do not see it coming. Fear creeps in. Anxiety creeps in. Instead of looking forward, you look backward. The security of the known world seems much more desirable than the possibilities of the future. You want to go back, back to the past, back to Egypt, back to slavery. At some point in our lives, we all spend time there, do we not? At some point in our lives, we all linger in that lonely and tension-filled place, a gap between the way things have been and the way we know they can be but are not so sure how or when these will become a reality. When caught up in that tragic gap, we do what the Israelites do in our story today. We murmur. We grumble. We doubt. And we blame, either others or ourselves.

If you find yourselves in one of these tough places right now, hear the good news. Grumbling and complaining aside, God hears. And, God responds. God is determined to take you to the Promised Land! In our first lesson today, verse 9, Moses says to Aaron, *“Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”* Aaron gave out instructions, and the Israelites did what they were told. They drew near. They came closer to God. And then, in their drawing near, Israel dramatically turned its face away from Egypt! In verse 10, we read, *“as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.”*

The next morning, there was a layer of dew all over the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the wilderness ground was a fine flaky substance. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, *“man hu,”* Hebrew phrase meaning, *“What is it?”* They had no idea what it was. The only bread they knew was the bread from the Pharaoh’s storehouse. The only bread they knew was the bread for which they had to toil as slaves. And, that was the bread they thought they wanted. Yet, God rained bread from heaven! A totally different kind of bread! A pure gift!

Yes, my friends. In our times of doubt and fear, God hears and responds. In our times of need and want, God provides and sustains, in ways we cannot even imagine. God is faithful. God is determined to take us to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Let us draw near, my friends! And let us turn our faces away from Egypt! Let us look forward and walk toward the glory of our Lord! God’s grace stands ready to guide us in our wandering and feed us in our hunger. Let the congregation say, Amen!