

## March 7, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Exodus 16:1–8](#)

TITLE: Bread From Heaven

Complain, complain, complain, complain, complain. Five times in these verses from Exodus we hear the Israelites complaining about Moses, complaining to Moses, and Moses complaining to God about the complaining Israelites. For all the grumbling going on, you'd think this is the main theme of this passage, but it isn't. The main theme is about bread—the gift of bread from heaven—and what this gift says about the giver.

About 40 years ago Lewis Hyde wrote a great book called The Gift. He describes an old tradition in Wales in which fairies would give bread to the poor in need. But this bread had to be eaten on the day it was given or it would turn into toadstools.<sup>1</sup> True gifts are always meant to be consumed, used—as opposed to being hoarded as private possessions. Hyde says we should think of gift-giving as a constantly flowing river. As gift recipients our task is to keep the water flowing; to be a channel for more gift-giving, not a dam that blocks the flow and stops the water from going any further. For when that happens, the gift perishes. It loses its value. It's the difference between Ebenezer Scrooge eating his gruel alone near his safe full of gold coins and Ebenezer Scrooge after the visits of the Christmas spirits, buying the goose for Bob Cratchit, donating to the city benevolence fund, and finally able to sit at his nephew's table for Christmas dinner.

This idea about gifts ties in neatly to the biblical story of the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness. They had fled Egypt about two weeks earlier. But now their supplies were running low and a desert wilderness stretched before them with no clear destination in sight. They complained about being hungry. They complained because they were afraid they would stay hungry. And they complained because they doubted whether Moses, or even God, would be able to make things better. A food crisis became a faith crisis.

The first thing God says in response isn't a rebuke but rather the promise of a gift. *"I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. Each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day."* You know the story – this is the manna that would be harvested each day and eaten that day, with a double portion given on the sixth day so they could rest on the Sabbath. It was a promise of a river of gifts that would flow over them each day. And like it says in the book of James: "Every good and perfect gift comes from God above" (James 1:17 KJV).

After God announced the gift of manna, God went one step further. God said this bread from heaven is a test as to whether or not the people will follow God's instructions. If they tried to stockpile the food, it spoiled. Maybe not turning into toadstools like in the Welsh folktale, but becoming inedible nonetheless. The bread would come each day, but would the people trust and believe in God's providence? Would they lose sight of the giver by trying to hoard, possess, and control the gift for themselves?

This is not just a dilemma involving the ancient Israelites. This is one of the big challenges we all face in our own lives. Do we only praise God when our belly is full and our cup overflows? What about when we hunger—hunger for bread, hunger for companionship, hunger for justice—does that hunger cause us to disregard what our faith trusts and believes? Those needs may be real—but are they the “most real” thing in our world? Is there a deeper reality we need to remember even in moments when we literally hunger and thirst or figuratively hunger and thirst for righteousness? With the gift of the manna came responsibility—we are to receive the gift according to the instructions of God the giver; collect enough for the day ahead and trust God will provide for tomorrow.

If you ever join a Jewish household for Sabbath dinner, you’ll discover that the meal begins with a candle-lighting and opening prayer. Then everyone washes their hands and sits in silence until the challah bread is uncovered, broken, and shared with everyone. The silence is part of the gift; the pause is one way to remember who is the source of all good things instead of only focusing on the thing itself. In the same way, our Presbyterian tradition always includes a prayer of confession in services in which we celebrate communion. Yes, all are welcome at our communion table; yes, it is a sacrament of invitation and community. But it is also a meal of remembrance at which Christ is the host. So we prepare ourselves for this meal by confessing the ways we have stumbled and strayed on the path that leads to this table. By doing this we honor both the gift and the giver and take personal responsibility as we receive the communion bread and wine.

This is important for one very simple reason: If you can’t see God in the ordinary gifts of life, how can you expect to see God in the extraordinary, wonderful things of life? When the Israelites complained and complained and complained, God didn’t snap back at them asking rhetorically “How can you doubt me, after the way I rescued you from slavery—after the shock and awe of the ten plagues I inflicted on Egypt or the miraculous parting of the waters that allowed you to escape into freedom?” God isn’t defined by the extraordinary nor disclosed only in the miraculous. God is revealed in the ordinary, in the commonplace, in the gifts of life itself. That day in the wilderness, God didn’t flash forth lightning bolts or cause the stars to fall from the sky. God’s love for the Israelites was shown when God offered bread—ordinary daily bread to ease their hunger. It may have appeared from heaven on the rocks near their campsites. It may have been the edible white substance that comes from tamarisk tree fruit common to that region. Either way God is the God of both the ordinary and the extraordinary. And God’s love is revealed to us in ways both mundane and miraculous.

This past week I finished Isabel Wilkerson’s book Caste: The Origins of our Discontents, which I commend to you. She tells the story about how Albert Einstein came to the United States in 1932, fleeing oppression in Nazi Germany. But once in America, Einstein was struck by the racist caste system present in this land. He would speak out against this prejudice, but also fight racism in ordinary ways. For example, in 1937 when the renowned opera singer Marian Anderson performed a concert in Princeton to an overflowing crowd, it turned out that the Nassau Inn refused to rent her a room for the

night. So Einstein invited her to stay in his home, a practice that continued for years whenever she came to Princeton even when the local hotels were fully integrated.<sup>2</sup>

Marian Anderson's voice was a gift that she generously shared. Some tried to denigrate the gift by racist oppression of the giver, stopping the gift from flowing freely in the land—but in this case, Einstein's ordinary act of hospitality allowed the gift to go forth unimpeded. His good deed both challenged an immediate injustice and opened the door for future healing. He acted in a small material way that had a much deeper spiritual impact.

Such is the nature of the bread from heaven. God doesn't shout down our fears or react angrily to our complaints. God's steadfast love endures forever – which is why God offers gifts and responsibilities. God provides daily bread and asks that we gather what we need even as we make sure all are fed. God reminds us that to be faithful in little things is also to be faithful in much larger things (Luke 16:10). God sent down manna, bread of heaven, to meet a bodily hunger and a spiritual hunger. God sent down Jesus Christ, the bread of life, into the ordinary flesh and blood reality of this world, so that our physical and spiritual hungers may be met. That's why when we celebrate communion, we say the words, "These are the gifts of God for the people of God. O taste and see and know that God is good."

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye has written this: *Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things*. In moments of loss and hunger, God is the provider of what we need – food, water, the kindness of neighbors, the mercy of strangers, the healing grace that helps us weather every storm. These things come to us as a gift—like bread from heaven. They come with a responsibility too – give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Seeing God in the ordinary opens our eyes to seeing God in the extraordinary. Suddenly all complaining falls away as we receive these gifts, and the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart offer continual praise to our Lord and God.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, 1983, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, 2020, p. 378.