

## Exodus 16:2-15 Common English Bible

*The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. The Israelites said to them, "Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of 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 this whole assembly to death."*

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "I'm going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I'll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "This evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning you will see the Lord's glorious presence, because your complaints against the Lord have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?" Moses continued, "The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the Lord heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren't against us but against the Lord."*

*Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole Israelite community, 'Come near to the Lord, because he's heard your complaints.'" As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses, "I've heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, '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.'" "In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" They didn't know what it was. Moses said to them, "This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.*

Ever heard the expression "lunch bag let-down?" Oh man — I've had a lot of lunch bag let-downs in my life! While kids in my class would get Twinkies in their lunches or those chocolate cupcake things with the swirly vanilla on top, I think I got the same thing every day ... a thinly spread peanut butter sandwich on dry brown toast and an apple. As a mother I appreciate it now, but back then ... well, it seemed like all the other kids had it made! I think it was actually a clever secret tactic to get us to make our own lunches, which we learned how to do early.

The Israelites knew something about a lunch bag let-down.

Two weeks ago with our scripture reading we left Moses and the Israelites after the amazing scene of narrowly escaping from the Egyptian army through the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. Safely on the other side, Miriam, Moses' sister, sings a song of triumph. You can imagine the celebration, the tears and laughter of relief and total joy: "Free at last, free at last, God almighty we are free at last!" There was just one small hitch: the desert. Talk about a lunch bag let-down!

The honeymoon of freedom is definitely short-lived. It's short lived because they don't

cross from slavery into the Promised Land, but from the hardships of slavery to the hardships of living in freedom in the desert. They no longer have taskmasters, but the oppression of the environment is huge. And they don't know this yet — but they will end up being in this harsh and inhospitable place not for a few weeks but for 40 years.

I feel like there is some lunch bag let-down in our “post-pandemic” world. We got through something incredibly hard, but instead of feelings of relief it seems like everything is harder. Health Care is stretched, people are financially stretched, the rental system seems broken, foodbanks have seen a 60% increase in people who rely on them, and homelessness is on the rise. I've said it before ... the whole world feels like it could use a break, but instead of a break it's challenges on top of challenges.

The first problem the Israelites encounter is the lack of food. They have been promised a land flowing with milk and honey — prosperity and food abundant. But right now they are in a place that does not naturally or easily produce food. You can't grow wheat or plant grapevines in a desert. For the Israelites it's more than disappointment, it feels like betrayal.

*“Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of 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 this whole assembly to death.”*

How quickly the miracle of the Red Sea is forgotten! Somehow, they don't say to themselves: “If God could get us out of an impossible situation where we couldn't swim a river or possibly fight and survive a battle with the entire Egyptian army — if God could rescue us from that — if God was with us in the past, won't God be with us now?” A crisis of food turned into a crisis of faith. It's hard to hold onto the faith of the past when faced with present difficulties. You have likely experienced this yourself at some point where a crisis or suffering makes it hard to feel God's presence, and your faith seems to plummet. We need to be compassionate with ourselves.

The psychologist and theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes describes self-compassion as “the ability to connect to our feelings, to respond to our suffering with kindness, and to desire that our suffering be ameliorated.” She points out that as Christians we understand compassion and mercy to be essential in how we treat others, but we often neglect it for ourselves and therefore cause ourselves greater suffering. She says that “We judge ourselves for our own suffering, listening to the voice of our inner critic as it rehearses our shortcomings, our errors, and our deficiencies.”<sup>1</sup>

God does not blame the Israelites for their lack of faith at a time of physical suffering. If God sees and is compassionate towards us in our suffering, we also should see and be compassionate with ourselves in times of struggle.

There are other times in the desert where the people's whining will get tiresome to Moses and to God — particularly after they get to Mount Sinai and receive the 10

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1. [1] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Sacred Self-Care: Daily Practices for Nurturing Our Whole Selves* (New York: HarperOne, 2023), 84.

commandments, but here there is no judgement towards the people for being hungry. Just like in Egypt, God hears their cries, and in love answers. God provides manna from heaven.

Commentators point out that the description of the manna lines up with a natural phenomenon that still takes place in the Sinai Peninsula today. There is a type of plant louse that punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and then excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste, it's rich in carbohydrates and sugar and it is still gathered by natives, who bake it into a kind of bread, and call it manna. The food decays quickly and attracts ants. And apparently there are still stories of migratory birds flying in from Africa or being blown in from the Mediterranean which are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.<sup>2</sup> However natural or supernatural, God provides for the people.

As Christians, when we read this story of Moses, we can't help but be reminded of Jesus feeding the 5000. In one of the feeding stories of Jesus, Jesus is trying to get away from everything and everyone because he has just learned that his cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded. He takes the disciples to a deserted place by boat, but the crowds figure out where they are headed and go on foot and beat them there. When Jesus arrives, the text says he is filled with compassion for the crowd and so he teaches them and then he feeds them.

I want you to see that there is connection between food and faith. Because the Israelites are hungry, they lose faith. And when they are fed, their faith in God is restored. There is a connection. Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life. Food for hungry people. This is a metaphor here, but it's also not a metaphor. He actually feeds people with real food and with teachings of the love of God. There is a connection between food and faith!

At our Vision Day last week one of the values that was lifted up in a number of different ways was our hospitality and food ministry here at Wall Street. Feeding people seems to be something that we are particularly called to do at this church, and we have so many people who are able and willing to serve and to help. We are always happy to have more. There is no question that it makes a difference. On the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, we scored the front-page headline and photo in the Recorder & Times: "Serving up community spirit: Wall Street United Church Thanksgiving Dinner a volunteer effort"!

We now have a Food Ministries team that helps to make sure all the different food ministries here are communicating with each other and that decisions about the kitchen are made together. At the last meeting on Thursday, Joan Johnson, who is carrying on the Friday morning Coffee House (that CJ reignited and expanded along with many volunteers,) was telling the group how so many of those who come really need food.

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2. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 182.

The same has always been true of our Sunday Suppers. People also increasingly need food for their loneliness. They need community and a safe place where they feel they belong. There is a connection between food and faith. Interestingly, scientists have found that there is connection between food and mental health. Better healthier food and having good gut health affects our brains, particularly reducing the likelihood of depression.<sup>3</sup>

Some churches emphasize faith and salvation and neglect the real needs of people. That's a mistake because there is a connection between food and faith. From Moses to Jesus to the early church there has always been a call to meet the physical needs of people. In the letter of James, it says: *"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."*

Other churches are very concerned about the physical needs of people, but don't think about the spiritual hunger that people have. That is also a mistake. There is a connection between food and faith. Having a life of faith is what makes the good parts of life vibrant and rich and the hard parts of life bearable. Having faith helps us to know deep down that we are not alone.

God does not answer the hunger cries of the Israelites by giving them a short cut to the Promised Land where there is plenty of food and "the livin' is easy." God provides food *in* the place of suffering. It turns out that *even in that Godforsaken place, God has not forsaken them, but is right there with them.*

What desert are you walking in now? What challenge do you need God's strength with today? God provides. And as we learn to see and to trust, our faith grows. Not instantly, but one day at a time. We also can learn to pray "Give us this day our daily bread." Give me strength, give me food enough for today. There is no lunch bag let-down in that kind of faith.

There is a connection between food and faith. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sacred meal that we share in celebrating Holy Communion. In a few minutes we will share communion. As we do, I want you to think about where you need help today, and to pray and ask God to help you with that need. You might even get a thought about who else you should ask for help. Asking for help is hard. But as we approach the communion table, we remember that we all come as needy and hungry people.

As we share communion, I also want you to think about how we are called to meet the needs of a hungry world. How might you help to feed others in body and soul?

Now let's prepare our hearts and minds for communion. Amen

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3. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/gut-health-mental-health-1.6974352#:~:text=Studies%20have%20shown%20that%20following,dairy%2C%20meat%2C%20and%20egg s.>

CBC link between healthy eating and healthy mental health. October 23<sup>rd</sup>.