

October 13, 2024

Exodus 16:1-16 [NIV]; Philippians 2:14-15 [NIV]

*“You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning...” Exodus 16:8*

As people living in the Western World, we have so very much to be grateful for, more than we can even fathom.

I'm reminded of the wealthy Albertan who was in the habit of giving his dad interesting gifts every Father's Day. One year it was hang-gliding lessons — the year before it was the entire record collection of Willie Nelson's Hits, autographed by the man himself! But this past year he had outdone himself. He purchased a rare kind of South American bird, called 'the translator.' This bird could speak five languages and sing "Yellow Rose of Texas" in any key while standing on one foot. The talented bird cost \$10,000, but he felt it was worth every penny. This would be the Father's Day gift his dad would never forget!

A week after Father's Day he called his father. "So, Dad, how did you like the bird?" His father responded, "It was delicious."

Even though Thanksgiving is about food for many Canadians, it's not really a time for culinary adventures. Most of us tend to go for the tried and true when it comes to turkey and pumpkin pie.

This morning's story is all about food. But it comes out of the desert wanderings of God's people.

The Hebrew people are on their long march between Egypt and the land of Canaan. God gives them a wonderful experience of deliverance from bondage in Egypt. They walk through the sea on dry land, while Pharaoh's army is swallowed

up in water. They celebrate with singing and dancing. We read about it in Exodus 15.

But joy quickly turns to complaining. The mob of ex-slaves pitch camp at Marah, where the water is bitter ... so God intervenes and sweetens the bitter waters. And Elim, the next stopping place, is a desert oasis with springs, palm trees and blue skies. It's everything tired walkers in the desert could ask for.

But God doesn't let the Hebrews settle for long at the resort-like Elim. God makes them move out into the ominous sounding Desert of Sin. The sun beats down, absolutely no shade to rest in. Water has to be rationed out. And worst of all, there is no food! I've been told that "An army marches on its stomach." So, no food is really bad news!

It wasn't long before there were complaints from all corners of the Hebrew camp and soon, a chorus of complaint becomes a murmuring through the mob.

*"Where do our leaders, Moses and Aaron, think they're taking us? Look, we were at that wonderful place, Elim. Why couldn't we stay there longer? Instead, we had to march out into this God-forsaken desert, where there's no shade, no water, no food."*

Some begin to grumble: "Man, remember what it was like in good old Egypt? Remember the meat and fish and great veggies of Egypt? Better to die as slaves in Egypt than starve as free people in the desert. Moses and Aaron have brought us out here to starve to death. Boo, hiss, waah.

It's been only one month since they had seen God beat up on all the powers of Egypt with the 10 plagues. Only a month since the parting of the sea. Just a month since their great deliverance from Egypt. It takes only one month for everyone to start griping, groaning and grumbling.

So God speaks through His servant Moses. "Okay. Okay! Enough with the complaints!" (Perhaps not an accurate translation). What Moses actually said on

God's behalf was *"He has heard your grumbings."* Three times in three verses, this short sentence: *"He has heard your grumbings."*

In essence God says, "If you want food, I'll give you food." The next morning, all around the camp was heavy dew. When the dew dried, thin flakes like frost appeared on the desert floor. *"Manna,"* they said. Did you know that manna actually means "What is it?"

Manna sounds like something a child might say when some new food comes to the table. "Manna! What is it?" Among the Hebrews, the name stuck—manna.

Who knows what manna was really like? Maybe it was something like frosted flakes. The Book of Numbers says that when ground into flour and made into cakes, manna tasted like wafers made with honey or like cakes baked in oil. Maybe they were like manna scones.

Whatever it tasted like, manna was God's provision for human hunger. It was sufficient and satisfying. Manna was the gracious gift of a good God.

*"I am the bread of life,"* said Jesus [John 6:48]. Jesus is today's manna. He satisfies our hunger and thirst.

But back to the wilderness. That's where we go again and again in everyday life. So much of our life is lived in one wilderness or another. When God said they were going to have manna, that's what they got. Manna on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and all through the week. There was leftover manna on Friday to last through the Saturday Sabbath so they wouldn't have to work collecting it on the Sabbath. I suspect they had manna straight and toasted. They had manna cooked, sauteed and plain.

That's a lot of the same thing — and if it's the same menu every day, you tire of it and forget what a wonderful blessing manna really is. Pretty soon the whiners stir up a chorus of complaint again. *"Who can live on bread alone? Do you remember all the good stuff back in Egypt! What wouldn't we give for some fresh vegetables, even if it was broccoli and brussel sprouts?"*

The Book of Numbers records their complaint: *“Now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”* [Numbers 11:6, TNIV].

Finally, sick and tired of listening, God said, again, my rough translation — *“You want meat, you’ll get meat! You’ll get meat ‘til you’re sick of it.”* Enter the quails! Small birds are brought into the camp by the east wind. They fly low, roosting at night on the ground, easy to capture. In the morning, it’s easy to gather a basketful of quail. Then, back to the tents and whatever Jewish cooks could make of a basketful of quail along with the ever-present manna.

Quail was good for a while. Doesn’t quail taste better than chicken? People praised God for quail. But it wasn’t long before some began asking if they couldn’t just once in a while have something else — lamb stew or even leftover turkey and stuffing. But it was just quail, quail, and more quail with manna. And the grumbling starts all over again.

So why was it that the people of God grumbled? Why does anyone grumble?

Very simply, we grumble because we forget. Grumbling is forgetfulness.

The poet Maya Angelou quotes her grandmother who said, **“What you’re supposed to do when you don’t like a thing is change it. If you can’t change it, change the way you think about it. Don’t complain.”**

Grumbling is forgetting the blessing of life itself and of life’s simple benefits.

Grumbling can become a habit of life. We Canadians are really good at grumbling. We can make a habit of ignoring or forgetting God’s goodness.

**A man and his teenage son were on a fishing trip miles from home. They decided to attend Sunday worship service at a small rural church. As they walked back to their car after the service, the father was filled with complaints. “The service was too long, the sermon was boring, and the singing was off key.” Finally the teenager could stand it no longer. “Dad, I thought it was pretty good for the dollar you put in the collection plate!”**

Paul writes to believers in Philippi: *“Do all things without murmuring* (*“complaining”* in some translations”). Paul uses the same word found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament; the word found in the story of grumbling Hebrews. It’s a word which sounds like what it means— ‘gongusmos.’ It’s like our English word “murmur.” Doesn’t that sound a lot like grumbling?

Grumbling is forgetting. And that goes for our relationship with God but also for our relationships with one another. Often, when I murmur about people close to me, it is because I’m forgetting the good things in our relationship.

One reason the stories of the Bible are written down and included for us is to help us not to forget.

If grumbling is forgetfulness...then thanksgiving is a response to grace.

The Exodus was the gracious act of a good and compassionate God. The Hebrews hadn’t earned God’s goodness. They had forgotten the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while suffering under Pharaoh. But God remembered God’s covenant with their ancestors and delivered them from slavery. The manna was a gift. So was the quail. Both gifts of God’s grace — God was graciously providing, though not the way the Hebrews wanted.

God still graciously brings exodus. God still graciously satisfies our hunger. God still graciously feeds us with the Bread of Life, Jesus Himself. Grace is something completely unearned, unmerited.

Thanksgiving is recognizing that we have been given something not owed to us. “But” someone says: “I’ve been a decent sort of person. I’m a good moral citizen. I believe in God, go to church periodically, put some money in the offering, pray when I think of it. Why shouldn’t God recognize my spirituality with showers of blessings?”

Goodness, we can be so darned entitled!

God’s goodness is never earned. God surprises us when we least deserve it, and God pours out gracious blessings on us. An entitlement mentality rarely leads to

thanksgiving. When we think we've got it coming to us, what is there to be thankful for? And we grumble when we don't receive what we think we deserve.

Thankfulness is the opposite of selfishness. The selfish person says, 'I deserve to be happy.' But the thankful soul realizes that life is a gift from God.

Thanksgiving is the response to grace. Thanksgiving humbly acknowledges: "God, how good You are to me!" Thanksgiving is responding to God's grace even in the midst of trouble. "In everything," Paul wrote, "give thanks." Not necessarily for everything, but in every situation, give thanks for who God is.

And so, to finish up...Give thanks even when the quail and manna are beyond boring. Give thanks because of God's grace even in the midst of difficulties.

Someone once asked me if I live up to my own sermons. I had to be honest and say, "I often don't, but I try." Like many of you this week, I have counted the incredible blessings of life. But there are times when I take them for granted. There are times when I forget and relapse into grumbling. There are times when I forget that life itself is a gift of grace.

May we always be thankful. Amen.

Please pray with me.

*We have many things to be thankful for, O God. Sometimes we remember them and other times we forget. When something large or small goes wrong, it fills our minds, and we forget those things for which—when we remember—we are thankful. Help us to remember the good things, gracious God. To name them, to savour them, and to be thankful to you. Amen*

(Avery Brooke, Plain Prayer for a Complicated World).