

Consider the Birds: the Quail
July 14, 2024
Rev. Anna Hubbard

This week friends we are talking about quail. And unlike her other chapters, this chapter in Debbie Blue's book doesn't have a lot to say about the actual bird. Which makes it a weird place to end. What she does say though, is that quail in today's story is about food. I promise we will get to that, but I wanted to start with some congregational participation.

So here is my question for you today. What do you want your last meal to be? No really, I want to know....

Let's hear it...if you had the opportunity to know you were having your last meal – what would you choose?

I think if I had to choose, I would go out on all the rich flavors of Thai or Vietnamese food. There is something about the complexities of the flavors and the richness of broths and curries that make me ridiculously happy. Or maybe perhaps I should choose something more comforting like homemade fried chicken, and mashed potatoes made with cream and butter, and fresh rolls with honey, oh and obviously fried okra. And DESSERT. All the dessert.

This question of what you want your last meal to be is such an intimate one. I am sure that each of us in the room has a different answer– and I am sure the reasons for the foods we choose vary too. What we eat is weaved into the fabric of who we are and our lived experiences. The very act of eating is how we find sustenance and comfort, and security when we first enter the world. I would argue food continues to contain these things throughout our entire lives. Food continues to speak a message of safety, nourishment, comfort, and even love. I don't think this was any less true for the Israelites who are wandering through the desert. As they journey day in and day out food becomes the topic of conversation, but it doesn't seem like what they are concerned with is their actual caloric intake. Both times that the quail come; it is because the people want something more. I often think about how we might feel if we were fed a steady diet of protein bars when what we wanted was steak. I imagine it might be like that.

In the midst of the wandering and wondering, the quail come as food both in Exodus and in Numbers. In Exodus the Israelites have just been liberated but they almost immediately question the wisdom of leaving Egypt. They get sarcastic with God, and question why they have been brought out here to die instead of dying as slaves with bellies full of bread. Early on the topic of last meals is on their mind. Here's the thing about the exodus story – I always have sympathy for the Israelites. I get they don't always seem to understand what God is up to. And I get they can be a difficult group. But even from my vantage point of knowing the end of the story. Knowing how long the journey is and why it's important. Even from that vantage point, I can't promise I won't get sarcastic on a trip through the desert where I am even a little bit

hungry and tired. I will be less than thrilled about the blazing heat during the day and the freezing cold at night. I will have something to say about how hard the ground is, and how much my feet hurt. I will wonder aloud why a JOURNEY must entail so much WALKING. Even if I've said yes to the journey, I am going to be a less than joyful participant. And so I have always had a soft place in my heart for the moaning, sarcastic, grumpy Israelites.

They have, after all been delivered to wander a desert for God knows how long. Literally. When the kids ask, "How much further?" they can't possibly answer. And they can't possibly know that when they actually get to the place, they are going most of the children asking, "Are we there yet?" will be dead and gone. They get a bad rap for being considered whiners, but I can't blame them. What about food? What about water? They aren't slaves anymore – but are they loved? Will they be taken care of? These are the very questions that keep them up at night. In the story in Exodus God responds immediately to their needs in a beautiful way. They are hungry and worried about being cared for and God says, "Behold, I will rain down bread of heaven and I will offer meat too. God says they shall be filled. In the evening quail filled the camp and in the morning the bread of heaven appeared so that they might know that God would take care of them. But even despite these over-the-top provisions, they struggle to trust God.

When the quail appear in Numbers, it's a different story. (Though some scholars believe it's a retelling of the same story.) Either way, in this version the people have been eating manna for a long time and have begun to find it lacking. They are tired of the same thing and they long for meat. But in this version of the story – they remember the meat they had in Egypt. They also clamor for cucumbers and melon and garlic and onions, again, like they ate in Egypt. Again, I feel for them. It takes practice to be grateful for what you have. They are fed, but they want more. God says to them, "you want meat? I'll give you meat until it comes out of your nostrils." God sends a wind that blows in quail. Tons and tons of quail. Piles of quail. Two cubics deep, the text says a day's journey on either side of the camp. The people gather the quail to eat but while the meat is still between their teeth" the people are struck dead by a plague and die. The story often is interpreted that the Israelites had too much desire and were punished. But Debbie Blue in *Consider the Birds* argues that this isn't a helpful way to read the story.

In the Psalms when reflecting on this event the Psalmist recounts that God gave them their own desire. But the thing is – their desire wasn't just excess. The problem isn't even that they wanted more but that what they desire is misplaced. Blue notes, that when the rabbis combed the ancient texts, they saw that in Exodus the manna tasted like wafers made with honey. In Numbers it is described as "cakes baked in oil" and from these differing accounts they concluded that manna was a miraculous food that could assume any taste a person desired. If someone in the family wanted meat, it tasted like steak. If the baby wanted mac and cheese it tasted like mac and cheese.

Perhaps if it rained manna here in this place, we each would taste our final meals we shared earlier. If this was the case manna was lavish and fulfilling. It isn't that they want more or different. It is that what they want is the food of their oppression. And God says in the sending of quail, if that is what you want, have at it, but it isn't going to give you the life, vitality, or the capacity to love and think.

These two stories set against each other are so interesting to me. Because these stories make me wonder what we hunger for. What are our desires? As humans, we always desire more. Desire is a tricky thing that humans have spent a lot of time trying to figure out. It isn't lost on me that this sermon, comes on the heels of Target Circle week and just before Prime days. When we are marketed at so as to be convinced, that there are products that exist out there in the world that we need but that we don't yet know about yet. It's silly right? My amazon cart might tell a story that we aren't as different from the Israelites as we'd like to believe. The point is made by both of these stories that it might be important in our lives to pay attention to what it is we desire. In what ways do we hunger and what are we hungry for?

I wish we could read today's story and see it through a black and white lens. I think my Sunday school teachers in high school would have liked this story to teach me and us that we should desire what is good and resist what is bad. Or better yet that to desire anything is bad. But it isn't so black and white. It is true, human desires have caused some real problems in our world. And in our personal lives too I imagine. In an effort to fulfill our desires we have hurt people and wrecked things. In America alone there is an imbalance of wealth as some have desired more no matter the cost, ignoring that others don't have health care or healthy food. But too, human desire has led to some pretty wonderful things. Desire is what has led to beautiful paintings and poetry and music. We don't just grow radishes, we desire more so we grow heirloom tomatoes and spicy basil, and 6 different kinds of mint. Our deepest most rewarding relationships come from a desire for connection and meaning.

In our stories, quail and manna aren't just food. Protein and carbohydrates. They are that, but not only that. MFK Fisher, the author of *The Art of Eating* reminds us that hunger is part of human nature. And that food, security, and love are intermixed. When we speak of hunger we are really speaking about love and our hunger for it. Desire isn't inherently bad, that's the point to laying these stories side by side. God doesn't tell the people not to desire, but to desire things that are grounded in love and freedom. If we look at the bible as an overarching story what we see is that God doesn't have any problem with desire on its own. And this isn't about only desiring holy things and not worldly things. Get out of here with that theology too. I don't think God is really that concerned about the new stick vacuum I bought as an early prime deal. But what God does seem to care about is how we are in relationship with one another. How do my desires cause pain to myself or my neighbor? How do my desires bring about beauty and love? What do I hunger for that brings about peace and justice. What do we hunger for that is about building the kingdom of God?

The word hunger has stuck with me this week. And I got to thinking about all the times I have gathered around tables and been blessed by the gathering. I came hungry. To tables of friends and tables at fine dining restaurants. The table or the place didn't really matter. It didn't even really matter what we ate at the table. There are dishes that stand out over the years like my maternal grandmother's goulash around her large wood table that she would sit us in the middle of to open our presents on our birthdays. I remember my paternal grandmother's cinnamon toast on tv trays in front of Saturday morning cartoons before our parents woke up. There was a friends pea salad on the first thanksgiving I couldn't be with family. I remember the wine, one that I would never have tried because I don't generally like reds, that was shared at a friend's kitchen island, when she told me about the death of her father. I remember the cheesy potato casserole that was at every church funeral dinner in Pryor. I remember the first time I tried my aunts French toast, convinced I wouldn't like it when she proved me wrong. I remember the steak that was shared the night we told friends we were pregnant with Hadley. Food has the power to transport us, but it isn't really about the food but about the way food has the power to satiate our hungers that go beyond the food. I have had amazing meals and I have sat on a friend's couch eating popcorn from their cluttered coffee table and it's not really about the food so much as it is that the food was the gateway to community and feeling loved and heard and seen and valued. Food was the way in which life was lived and shared. You see food, and comfort and security, they are all so intrinsically tied together.

Is it any wonder that so much of scripture describes our relationship to God through food?

"Taste and see that the Lord is good."

"My whole being thirsts for God".

"Harken diligently to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in fatness".

"Whoever comes to me will never go hungry."

You see the Israelites are hungry. They desire the comfort of the food they have known. They demand meat of God, but what they really seem to need is the reassurance that God is truly with them. That they are loved and safe and that they are cared for. I have sat at so many tables for so many meals, and what I have learned is this – my hunger is what brings me there, and while I am often nourished physically, I find it is in the sharing that happens around tables that my hunger is satiated. I find out I am not alone. I find out that I am not as fragile as I feel. I find out that the world is full of beauty if I will only pay attention to it.

Maybe these stories are just about us paying attention a little more to our hunger. Friends, God isn't in the business of oppressing us, but rather desires to bring us more fully to life. God doesn't want us to desire less, God wants us to desire more. These stories help us to understand what life with God is like. We will wander, and doubt and wonder. The quail are both a sign of God's extravagance, and a sign that sometimes our desires need transforming.

May we be people who hunger for connection and relationship. May we be people who hunger for a world where we continually pull up more chairs to the actual tables and the figurative tables. May our desires lead us to make changes in the world that lead to freedom. May our desires move us to reveal love in the world. Amen.