

**Exodus 16:1-12**  
**Lent 1**  
**Lent in Plain Sight-Bread**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

Have you ever given someone exactly what they wanted only to have them complain? Maybe you have cooked a meal and had a family member complain about the way you prepared it or what you prepared. Or maybe you did the laundry and were told you didn't fold the sheets properly. It doesn't feel good to do something for someone only to have them complain about it. When that happens to me, it doesn't make me want to do anything for that person any time soon. I've always imagined that would be how God in the Exodus story felt. Like, seriously, I just saved you from the villainiest super villain ever and now you're hungry? In the Israelites' defense, though, we all get hungry and many of us aren't terribly charming when we are. And, in a surprise to nobody, God is a lot more gracious than I am.

If you haven't read the Exodus story, you may be wondering how the Israelites ended up hungry in the desert in the first place. They had been enslaved in Egypt, working in the hot sun, forced to build buildings with bricks they made themselves, day after day crying out to be freed. The Exodus story tells us that God heard their cries and came to their rescue, with the help of a man named Moses. God's intervention and Moses' leadership created a way out for Israel to escape Pharaoh, their oppressor. Their liberation was the moment Israel became a nation, a community whose common experiences forever bound them to each other, to Moses, and to God.

Once their dramatic escape from Pharaoh was complete, as you can imagine, there was celebration. They were free at last. They didn't really know what was next, but they were not under Pharaoh's thumb anymore and that was a reason to rejoice. In chapter 15, there are songs of praise recorded, one by Moses and the other by Miriam, Moses' sister. Moses' song sounded prophetic as it included not only victory over Pharaoh through the Red Sea, but other victories that hadn't even happened yet. Miriam sang and led the women in making music as they rejoiced. All was finally well for the Israelite people.

Yet almost before the praises died down, reality set in. The Israelites had no clue where they were, where they were going, how they would get there, how long the journey would last, or what life could be like when they got there. All they had known was enslavement. Now, they were free, but they were hungry and there was nothing to eat. Is it any wonder they complained (Exodus 15: 22-27)? Sure, there was plenty of gold and silver in the plunder they acquired from their captors. It would be more than enough to build the tabernacle, their tents—and even a golden calf. None of that was edible though. In that desert land, what would they drink? All they could see all around them was the promise of famine and death. It was so devastating that Egypt's abundant food supply began to look pretty good. In fact, they thought, "Might we be better off enslaved?"

What the Israelites were experiencing is one of the reasons people in all times and places, who are oppressed, fear seeking their own liberation. "Things can always be worse," they fear. Here's an example from our own history and a good one to finish out Black History month. In the United States, African people, enslaved by white people, faced the same tough choices when it came to seeking their own liberation. Yes, white people play the role of Pharaoh in this story. The punishment for people who were enslaved who were caught running away was brutal. They were physically and verbally abused, or worse, sold to a buyer, purposefully separating them from their families. This was the worst punishment imaginable. It was fear of this that very often kept them from running for freedom.

There were some people who were enslaved, though, who took the risk and ran. Like the newly liberated Israelites, though, escaped slaves would have faced a life of hardship, with little food and infrequent access to shelter. In addition, for the people who were enslaved here, there was the constant threat of local white sheriffs, white slave catchers, or white civilian lynch mobs. Truthfully, unlike the Israelites, most never made it to freedom. That came much later. People who were enslaved and chose to run often returned to the plantation after a few days or weeks away, tired, hungry, and unable to survive as wanted fugitives. Some were carried back in chains after their capture by white lawmen, their punishment serving as a reminder to others not to try it. "Things can always be worse."

But in the Exodus story, the Israelites made it. They were free from their oppressor. And yet, there in that moment, slavery looked good to them. They were miserable and they blamed God and since God wasn't standing there with them, they blamed Moses. Moses went from hero to zero really fast. God heard their complaints and told them God would provide them with meat in the evening and bread in the morning. This text, with specific instructions about gathering the manna, introduces the notion of "enough" as it pertains to God's provision of food. Just as God had provided water from a stone for the people in chapter 15, now God would provide food.

All these generations removed, it would be easy for us to overlook the extravagance of the quail and manna. We are accustomed to eating meat whenever we want to, many of us every day, unless we choose otherwise. But in this ancient world, "the average family ate meat only on festive occasions."<sup>1</sup> In this non-producing, arid land, the people not only received meat, but received some every day, as if every day was a special day and maybe it was. Maybe that's how we ought to try to see each day.

The second gift was equally generous. At first glance, it does not appear like much. The manna was sort of mysterious. If you gathered a little, there was enough, and if you greedily gathered up a lot, there was still just enough, and if you gathered just the right amount, it was the right amount. Throughout this story, the manna is just enough, no more and no less than what the people need. I wonder, as you hear this story, is there a part of you that longs for God to be in charge of food distribution in our world today? I found myself imagining what it would be like to live in a world where everyone had just enough to eat. Nobody died of starvation, no child went to bed with an empty belly, wondering if breakfast was going to be a thing, and none of us laid around our houses miserable because we ate our weight in turkey that day. What would it be like if everyone just had enough?

We've gotten the idea that there really isn't enough food today. That has to be why people are starving and perpetually hungry. If there was enough food, everyone would eat, right? We may find it hard to believe, but today there is still enough food, just like there was for the Israelites. Yet in many parts of the world, there is a shortage of food that is a life-threatening and even life-ending reality —

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<sup>1</sup> King and Stager, *Life in Ancient Israel*, 68.

quite often due to no fault of their own. Climate change, war, terror, greed, and globalization are the reasons way too many people do *not* experience the proverbial manna from heaven. But the problem is not the quantity of food available. The problem is the distribution of food. Some of us have access to so much food...an abundant amount of food, while our neighbors go to bed hungry.

Theologian and author, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, wrote a chapter for the book, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*, in which he takes on the “myth of scarcity” that we read about in the greed and the hoarding practices of the Pharaoh of Egypt and that we observe today in the economic monopoly of contemporary Pharaohs by way of “greedy CEO salaries,” in legislator proposed welfare and entitlement reform, predatory student loans, and even tax reform, which all speak of “the drive to privatize wealth away from care for the public good.”<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann challenges us to relearn what he calls the “lyric of abundance” that believes there is more than enough [food] to go around in God’s good creation. Part of that relearning is accepting our responsibility to take only what we need, to actively seek ways to encourage our neighbors to do the same, and to participate in the distribution of food and necessities so that everyone has enough. No more, no less.

I recognize that the concept of God’s provision can be misused in the name of prosperity gospels and shaming people for “lack of faith,” but we read in the bible that provision comes in many forms. In the story of the gathering on the mountainside where a little boy shared his five loaves (John 6:1-13), provision comes through the generosity of others, and there was enough for everyone. And sometimes it comes from one’s own advance planning, like we read in Ecclesiastes 11, “Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back...” (Eccl. 11:1), or by pleading for justice like the gentile woman did when she challenged Jesus, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7:24-30). The lesson is not that all our needs will be magically met by a magician in the sky, and we will never want for anything, but that there is goodness in the world and enough to go around if we make it so.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Truth of Abundance: Relearning Dayenu.” in *The Covenanted Self: Exploration in Law and Covenant* (ed. Patrick Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 108-122.

We are called to embody God's provision of food by feeding the ones near and far who are in need. We are called to this for no other reason than we have been fed. Award winning Spanish Chef Jose Andres has devoted his life to this calling. He is the founder of an organization called World Central Kitchen. The organization started with Chef Jose's simple idea: when people are hungry, send in cooks. Not tomorrow, today.

He writes, "Everyone knows that food is central to life and family all over the world...food is even more essential in a crisis." World Central Kitchen began in 2010 after an earthquake devastated Haiti. Cooking alongside displaced Haitians in a camp, Chef Jose found himself getting schooled in how to cook black beans the way the Haitians wanted them. He learned that food relief is not just a meal that keeps hunger away.

He says, "It's a plate of hope. It tells you in your darkest hour that someone, somewhere, cares about you. This is the real meaning of comfort food. It's why we make the effort to cook in a crisis."<sup>3</sup>

World Central Kitchen doesn't just deliver raw ingredients and expect people to fend for themselves. They don't just dump free food into a disaster zone. They source and hire locally wherever they can. This helps to jump-start economic recovery. After a disaster, food is the fastest way to rebuild a sense of community. People are helped back to work preparing it, and lives are put back together by fighting hunger. "Cooking and eating together is what makes us human,"<sup>4</sup> says the Chef.

World Central Kitchen has served people all over the world, like Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. They fed tens of millions struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic. They were in Beirut after a blast devastated the city. When bushfires ripped through Australia, they were there. They were under a bridge with thousands of asylum seekers in Texas, in a demolished Kentucky town after brutal tornadoes, and on the Louisiana coast when another enormous hurricane made landfall. Today, World Central Kitchen is in Ukraine too.

Chef Jose says, "...food is not a luxury reserved for the lucky few. It's a universal human right to live free from hunger...it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the scale

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldcentralkitchen.org/story>, accessed 2/25/23.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.worldcentralkitchen.org/story>, accessed 2/25/23.

of the challenges we face, and the speed of each new crisis. But many complex problems have simple solutions. Sometimes you just need to decide to do something. Sometimes you just have to show up with a sandwich or some warm rice and beans. You'd be amazed at the power of a plate of food. It can change the world, and so can you."<sup>5</sup> For our neighbors in need, a sandwich, a can of soup, or a protein bar can be manna from heaven.

Manna from heaven changed the world for the Israelites. Not only did it physically sustain them, but it showed them something about their God. They hadn't been liberated only to starve to death in the desert. God had provided, even though they had complained and behaved badly.

I have never experienced tacos raining from the sky. But what I have experienced is having my needs met because of another person's generosity or because I get up everyday and go to work. But, to me, God is the source of all generosity. It's one of the ways we reflect God into the world. And I think God has given me a passion for the work I do that happens to provide for me and my family. And I wish that same passion for everyone as they provide for their families.

In the biblical narrative, bread is a symbol of abundance. And what the biblical writers want us to understand is that our God is a god of abundance. In the kingdom of God, there is enough to eat, there is extravagant (abundant) hospitality, there is overflowing mercy and compassion, and in the kingdom of God there is absolutely no shortage of love. Like manna from heaven, there is just enough for everyone.

In this first full week of Lent, we are invited to use bread as an object for reflection. Where do you sense abundance in your life? Is there someone to whom you need to express gratitude? Do you have some fear of scarcity, of not having enough? Can you set down that fear for your journey through Lent? Are you willing to entertain the idea that there really is enough for everyone and perhaps get involved in making that happen?

Is there someone in your life that needs to see what abundance looks like? Can you show them?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldcentralkitchen.org/story>, accessed 2/25/23.

I hope you give yourself the gift of time to reflect this week. That is what this season is about. And, I promise, if you will put in the work, this journey will help you find all sorts of things. Let's see where this week takes us. Amen.