

Exodus 16

We Grow

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Last week, we heard God's call to Moses from the burning bush, to liberate God's people who were enslaved by the Pharaoh in Egypt. That was early in the book of Exodus. By chapter 14, through the obedience of Moses and his brother, Aaron, and a series of progressively awful plagues that affected the Egyptians, God's people escaped Egypt as the waters of the Red Sea opened and allowed them safe passage. In chapter 15, they were across the waters. They were free. They looked behind them, dancing, singing, and praising God, who had delivered them. Today, we are in chapter 16 where their journey to the promised land has begun. Finally, they will leave behind oppression and scarcity. What could wrong?

This is Exodus 16:1-18:

16 The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim (ee-luhm); and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim (ee-luhm) and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the

morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹² “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer (an omer is an ancient Israelite unit of dry measure) to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” ¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them.

Well, the Israelites’ euphoria at being liberated didn’t last long did it? “Are we there yet? I’m hungry. I wish I had stayed home. I didn’t want to come anyway.” Suddenly, slavery wasn’t so bad...at least they were guaranteed food. Never mind that the work was grueling, and it would never secure the future of their families. Never mind that they were under Pharaoh’s cruel thumb. In just a few short verses, the people went from celebration and praise to anger and complaints. And who were they mad at? Moses and Aaron...the ones God had used to liberate them. “You should have just let us die there,” they said.

This text makes me feel like I ought to talk about how ungrateful the Israelites were. Reading this part of the narrative, it is easy to point the finger at the

Israelites for their behavior. God had just saved them, and here they were complaining. Indeed, a form of the word “complain” appears six times in this narrative. They were miserable and hungry and scared. So, they lashed out at Moses and Aaron, blaming them for their situation. But I can’t bring myself to bash the Israelites because I see a lot of myself in them. How about you?

We human beings tend to have short memories. When we are miserable, we wallow in our misery. We whine and complain. We let fear that the misery is forever dictate our response. Speaking for myself, in moments of extreme misery or, to be truthful, mild annoyance, I don’t have the capacity to give thanks for what **isn’t** going wrong. The misery of the moment overshadows absolutely everything.

This tendency of mine was highlighted for me Friday evening when I stopped at the store on my way home. While there, I forgot to buy mushrooms. When I realized it, halfway home, knowing John needed them to make the dinner I had requested, I had to stop at another store to get them. Grocery shopping is the bane of my existence. So naturally, when I walked in the house and John asked me how my day was, I said, “It was the worst day ever.” He said, “What happened?” I told him about the mushrooms and he said, “That’s annoying. What else happened?” I said, “That’s pretty much it. I worked on my sermon most of the day.” So, no, I am not going to criticize the Israelites for their complaining in the wilderness.

When I read stories like this, where there is a big swing from everything being great to everything being horrible, I am reminded of this quote by author and activist L.R. Knost: “Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful.”

Through all the amazing, awful, ordinary, mundane, and routine moments, God is present, and we can trust God to provide for us and to always love us. And for some of us who are more hard-headed than others, it takes a lifetime to learn this. This Exodus story is the beginning of the Israelites learning the truth: We can count on God to show up.

This story opens about two months after their liberation. These folks were wandering in some of the most arid and barren land on the planet. To survive, the people would need to learn to depend on God. Just as a baby learns to trust that her parents will feed her, the people must learn to trust God. But here's the thing, their bodies may have been free from slavery, but the fear of scarcity, that was part of that experience, still had a tight hold on their hearts. They did not assume that since God liberated them God would show up to feed them. They probably thought Moses should have had a plan...you know, some coolers with food, a charcuterie board or something. And when it was clear he did not, their fear kicked in.

God responded to the cries of the people. The extravagance of God's provision can easily be overlooked today by our 21st century eyes. "In the evening, quails came up and covered the camp" (Exodus 16:13). Most of us are accustomed to eating meat every day unless we choose otherwise. But in this ancient world, average families ate meat only on festive occasions. In this non-producing, arid land, the people not only received meat, but did so daily.

The second gift is equally generous. At first glance, it does not appear like much. Twice the biblical text uses the word thin, "as thin as frost," to describe this mystery. The Israelites learned quickly that the manna would not be used to feed their fear of scarcity. If they gathered a little, there was enough, and if they greedily gathered up a great amount, there was still just enough (the extra would spoil), and if they gathered just the right amount, it was the right amount.

The Israelites were being shown and taught, every single day, that God could be trusted to provide for them...and this would go on for a very long time. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. All the while, they were also learning that living under the reign of God was much different than living under the reign of Pharaoh. In Pharaoh's world, you met the work quotas, or you didn't eat. In God's world, everyone eats. Everyone is equal. This story teaches us that our hard work is not why God gives us the daily bread we pray for. God provides for God's people because God is generous. This is the beginning of God's people learning what it means to live in community as people of God. And we are still learning that today. Even now, we struggle with how we should act toward our neighbors and how we should respond to God's generosity.

In his book, *Journey to the Common Good*, theologian, Dr. Walter Brueggemann writes about how hard it is for us to wrap our minds around God's over the top generosity not just in this story but throughout the biblical narrative, he writes, "...there is something inescapably dreamy and unreal about inexplicable generosity. When we hear of it, we wonder about it and doubt it, because it does not fit our expectations for a quid pro quo world. Indeed, about such divine generosity there is something so dreamy that we reserve for it the special term miracle, something outside the ordinary that breaks the pattern of the regular and the expected, something that violates the predictable."

Abundance is a dream to us even now. Scarcity is what feels real. We cling to what we have, fearful we will run out of toilet paper during a pandemic or money after retirement. We are anxious about not having enough, even though, by the world's standards, we are surrounded by abundance. We let the algorithms of social media feed our fears, with every click the world seems scarier and more sinister, we are more and more dissatisfied with what we have. The truth is we, those of us worshipping together today are okay. We have enough. We are enough.

But we cannot ignore the realities of some of our neighbors, of food shortage and famine that for many people all over the world is life-threatening, quite often due to no fault of their own. The effects of climate change, war, terror and globalization on the daily lives of many people in places like El Salvador, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Indonesia challenge us to recognize that far too many people do *not* experience the proverbial manna from heaven. And certainly, there are people in our own community, who, without the help of organizations like Mary and Martha, Agape, and Disciples Christian Church, would be facing the same thing. Food insecurity, homelessness, and everything that poverty brings is real to more people than we care to acknowledge.

But before we complain to God, we should remember that it is not God who is responsible for the inequality we see around us. Today's text teaches us that God's intention is for all of creation to have what it needs. It's human beings who have made systems to the contrary. We live in a world in which it is normal for some people to not eat, for some people to not have adequate shelter, for some people to not have access to medical care. And we say things like, "they are lazy," "they need to get a job," "they need to stop drinking," "they should have stayed

in school,” to make us feel better about walking by them. And some of us go home at night and pray to God, “Why don’t you do something?” Well, I am here to tell you, God did do something. God created you. And me.

God created all of us to take care of all of us. We are still learning and growing into what that means and how that looks in our lives. This week, in the Leadership Bartlesville class I am part of, we visited a dilapidated house the city is planning to tear down soon. We learned that when the city went to board up the house, there were people living in the house in tents. The inside of the house was awful. The floor has holes in it. The drywall was gone, the roof in disrepair. The smell was unpleasant. There was a lot of conversation about how houses like that destabilize neighborhoods, which is why the city spends money to tear them down when owners refuse. I couldn’t stop thinking about what must have happened to the people who were living in the house in tents. The alternatives must have been really terrible for them to choose to stay in that place. I wonder where they are this morning.

People should not be sleeping in dilapidated houses. People should not be perpetually hungry or cold. People should have access to some Advil if they have a headache and some Tums if their stomach is upset. And our first reaction to people who are suffering should not be, “You should have...” Our first reaction should be, “Let us help.” We serve a generous and loving God and we are called to reflect that generosity and love in the world.

Learning to do that together is one of the ways We Grow at DCC. This week, I asked a few members what they have learned and how they have grown through their involvement at DCC. Here are some of their answers:

I’ve learned that there are many ways to think about God and Jesus.

I’ve learned that not all Christians believe the same things.

I’ve learned that the communion table has a place for me.

I’ve learned that it’s okay to laugh in worship.

I’ve grown in my understanding of biblical interpretation.

I’ve changed my mind about many things, including how I feel about immigrants.

I’ve learned that the way we talk about God matters.

I’ve learned that homosexuality is not a sin.

I’ve learned that children in the sanctuary brings me joy.

I’ve grown to love reading non-fiction.

I've learned how to use Audible and Zoom.

I've learned that my kids needed extra grandparents.

I've learned that what Kelley says about love is true. Love wins. Always.

We've been through a lot in the five years I've been here. And this church was here and doing important things a long time before I came. I think we have proven that the saying, "Something will grow from all you are going through. And it will be you," is true.

Life is full of opportunities to learn, and I am so grateful to be learning and growing with all of you. Amen.