

God Provides Manna

It's easy to criticize Israel for their complaining here. I mean God has just done an amazing thing. After 400 years of slavery, they are free by God's hand. God empowered Moses to part the sea...the sea for heaven's sake...so they could escape from Pharaoh's army.

Then God let the sea crash back over that army so they could never be a threat again. And now they're complaining? Saying they were better off in Egypt where they at least had food?

But actually their complaints are completely valid. There really is no food. Why did they go through all that just to die of starvation in the desert? They don't trust Moses and they really don't trust God either.

But this is only two months after Israel escaped Egypt. For 400 years before that, the Israelites may not have really known God at all. There may have been a historical memory of the God of their ancestors. But during that time of oppression, it certainly didn't seem God was doing anything for them.

Now, God has won their freedom. But still they're out in the desert, starving, and their ability to trust this God is still pretty shaky. It's not unreasonable.

But God comes through. For this endeavor to succeed, the people will have to be able to trust God, and in turn God shows them the steadfast love and faithfulness they'll need.

And God will need to be able to trust them, too. So there is a bit of a test here. What God is doing here is essentially another new creation. God is creating a new community...a community that is to become a nation that represents God to the world. Most of the rest of the first five books of the Bible are God's work to shape that community.

This story tells us several things about the kind of community God wants them to be. That's where the story gets some traction for us, because as Christians, we are adopted into this community.

So what does the story tell us about what kind of community God wants?

First it's a community that trusts that God will provide enough. And here's the good news in this passage – God does! God does provide enough. The people are scared. They worried they won't get enough to eat for themselves and their children. But God provides.

It gives the people another piece of reassurance that God is faithful and that God can be trusted.

Second, God does want a community that participates in their own well-being. God provides the food, but people need to gather it. And people in the household who can gather should gather for those who can't.

Third, God is forming a community that won't take more than it needs for the day. That's the test to see if God can trust them. If they gathered too much, at the end they just had enough. Later we're told if they took more than they needed for the day, it molded and got filled with maggots.

And finally, God is forming a community in which the Sabbath rest is observed. The only day the people can gather up twice the manna without it going bad is the day before the Sabbath.

This passage happens before the scene at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the law. Before the 10 commandments were even a thing, God provided for a rest day.

In fact, even before the giving of the 10 commandments, God is already shaping the people into the community God wants...so that they can show the rest of the world. The giving of the law, including the 10 commandments, will come later. It will put into a place a framework for all aspects of their communal life.

But even without the whole of the law, even just with what God asked of them here, we can get a vision of what our own life as a community of faith should be. And living into that vision just might lead us to making some headway with some of our own problems.

How much goes wrong in our world because people fear not having enough? We too are called to trust that God does provide enough. Do you trust that?

How our lives are shaped economically comes from the answer to that question. When we don't trust, the result is pervasive anxiety that we won't have enough. Powerful people structure the world so that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Wars are waged over resources and land.

If on the other hand, we answer yes, we do trust that God provides enough, we will rest secure that we will have what we need to live. But if we do answer yes in our society as it is, then we got some explaining to do. Because there are clearly plenty of people who do not have enough. And if we trust that God provides enough for all, then we...we who have more than we need...need to take a hard look at ourselves.

How are we working to make sure all have enough. Charity can be a part of the answer. Are we giving generously, particularly to organizations that work against hunger and poverty?

The politics are complicated and I don't really get all the nuances of economics. But I do think there is an aspect of the massive inequity in our own culture that calls on us to speak out. To advocate for a just tax system and other economic policies rather than a system that seems to mostly benefit the wealthy.

Charity...mercy...justice...in our complicated 21st Century world, we have to read this story and make the connection that God believed both too much and too little was a problem.

And it's also a spiritual issue. Maybe we can't do much to change complex systems, but we can look at the way we use money and resources in our own lives.

And we can look at our anxiety about money and having enough as a sort of spiritual barometer. If we think about giving away sizeable chunks of our savings...or we advocate for a tax system that actually disfavors us...how solid is our trust that God will take care of us...that we will have enough?

I find the economics of the community God desires to be one of the most troublesome aspects of scripture, mostly because I often feel convicted.

There's an approach to life that is now called minimalism.

It's a movement where people try to simplify their lives by getting rid of stuff and in general leading a more simple life. It's a way to be more in line with God's economics. This isn't something invented in modern times.

People in monastic orders have long taken vows of poverty and simplicity.

The idea appeals to me very much. The actual implementation seems very hard. I mean, I don't think twice about jumping on an airplane to go to a baseball game in Chicago. That isn't minimalism.

In the end, I have to say I don't have all the answers. I don't completely know how we change a world where some take way too much manna and others don't get enough. It's not like the excess gets moldy and filled with maggots.

But awareness matters. Awareness of our own insecurity where money and possessions are involved. Awareness of our own inability to truly trust God in everyday matters. Awareness of the suffering of others.

Perhaps the most important thing is to become more aware of God's presence among the least of these. To recognize that while the world may dismiss them, God does not.

That awareness can only come from being open to the nudges and whispering of the Holy Spirit when we read stories like this and catch a glimpse of God's vision for the world.

The story also invites us to take our needs to God. If not literal food, what do we need to be better able to trust God? Really, prayer is what gets us there. Time just resting in God's presence. Times of reflection and silent meditation when God can speak words of assurance to us.

And today we'll be nourished by the bread of life that is Jesus. Today we'll receive that bread of forgiveness and new life.

In the prayer after communion, we will pray for that bread to go with us into the world as literal food for the hungry.

In communion, in that tiny manna-like wafer, we receive God's mercy and grace in abundance, and we are assured again, that God can be trusted.