

“It’s Raining Manna, Hallelujah!”

Exodus 16:2–15

Julie R. Harley – September 18, 2011 – First United Church of Oak Park

When we open the book of Exodus, the Israelites are just a group of Hebrew slaves. God sees their suffering and chooses Moses to lead them out of Egypt. They cross the Red Sea in a miraculous night passage, as God parts the waters and enables them to walk on dry land.

Then the people believe in the Lord and in Moses, and they begin their journey as free people, going through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

After that, for the first time, the people are called a “congregation.” It’s the first time the word is used in the whole Bible. And what makes them a congregation? Take a look at the verb that follows the first use of the word “congregation”: **The whole congregation of the Israelites complained.**

The first congregation was formed by complaints! Complaining against their leaders in the wilderness is what makes them a congregation. The word “complaining” appears **seven** times in these 13 verses. Nice to know where that tradition started.

After all, why else do people band together? We congregate in order to organize. We organize in order to change our situation. We change our situation by congregating, because we know that greater numbers give us influence and influence gives us power. You want to know the most powerful lobby group in Washington, DC? It’s AARP (the American Association of Retired Persons). Can you guess the second most powerful lobby? The State of Israel. Do they both get results? You bet they do.

So the first congregation circulated a petition against Moses and Aaron over an extremely valid issue: **they were hungry**. It was the 15th day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt, and they were out of food.

The congregation gathered together and confronted Moses and Aaron.

“It would have been better to die in Egypt, where at least we had food to eat! Why have you brought us into this wilderness? Do you want to kill the whole congregation with hunger? What good is freedom without food?”

The Israelites were looking back at the old days in Egypt (just a few weeks ago), and in hindsight their former taskmasters were looking pretty good. They forgot about the forced labor. They forgot about the oppressive conditions. They forgot about the killing of the firstborn male children. At least when they were slaves, they got their fill of bread.

When we are unhappy in the present, it's natural to glorify the past and to romanticize the good old days – which probably were not as good as we think they were. Presidents call to mind the days of Lincoln or Reagan in an effort to recapture momentum for their cause.

Even the very first congregation, right here in Exodus chapter 16, looks backward to slave days instead of walking forward to the Promised Land.

As we endure an economic recession that began three years ago and shows no signs of improving, we feel the temptation to worship at a shrine to the past.

Remember when gas cost \$2 a gallon instead of \$4? That wasn't so long ago.

Remember when buying a home was your best investment for the future?

Remember when banks actually paid you **interest** rather than charging you for the privilege of having an account?

Remember when you could move whenever you felt like it, because there were always people ready to bid on your house or condo?

Remember when you could retire before age 70 because you could count on your pension fund?

The Sufi poet Hafiz wrote a poem about this temptation to yearn for the past.

What do sad people have in common?

It seems they have all built a shrine to the past and often go there

And do a strange wail and worship.

What is the beginning of happiness?

It is to stop being so religious like that.

This recession has democratized suffering --- it's affected each of us in some way. But rather than getting trapped in religion that **worships the way things were**, we have an opportunity to deepen our connections, to be a real congregation.

You see freedom doesn't mean much if we don't have community. Community is built on deep, faithful relationships.

And the truth is, community is formed much more by shared pain than by shared pleasure. Only people who have suffered together can save one another. The Israelites finally become a real congregation when they get together to complain.

Complaining is something we do very well here at First United . . . **for the right reasons.**

Prayers are often a way of complaining and crying out to God for a change in the world or a change in someone's life. This is a powerful praying congregation.

Hymns are often a lament for our sins and the world's injustices, and we sing to God and ask for change. This is a powerful worshiping congregation.

Christian education often begins with a problem that needs to be addressed, and we ask for God's guidance to do what is right. This is a powerful learning congregation.

Mission work is inspired by our complaints on behalf of our neighbors who don't have food, who can't get the education they need, and who are suffering from human rights abuses in countries like Colombia and Palestine. This is a powerful open community united in justice and love.

As Christians, **we are called to complain** about the gap between the way things are and the way we know they could be. We are called to be catalysts for change through prayer, advocacy, worship and education. And when we band together to take action as a congregation, especially with our community

partners and the witness of our two denominations, we have much more power than we would as individuals.

Christians are not called to be **nice** all the time. **Being nice is not a fruit of the Spirit.** We're called to live as members of a covenant community, and that means at times we will have to complain, to challenge each other . . . and even to challenge God.

The question is: how will God respond to our complaining?

God could easily ignore us, because we're annoying.

God could easily get angry, because we're ungrateful.

God could easily judge us, because we expect changes to happen without any sacrifice on our part.

But we learn **who God is** through this story in Exodus 16. **God listens to our complaints.**

God hears our cries. And God uses these wilderness times to transform us and to change our perspective.

After all of the Israelites' moaning and complaining, God said, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day."

Every evening as the people gathered to eat, quails covered the camp, giving them meat. Every morning, there was a layer of dew on the desert sand, and when the dew lifted, there was a fine flaky substance like frost on the ground. It was raining manna, hallelujah!

Sandy Jefferson tells a story about his mother, Bessie. When Sandy and his brothers and sisters were in the car and got to fighting and complaining about things, his mother would pull the car over. Sandy always thought she was getting ready to spank them. But instead Bessie would turn around and say to them: "Children, it's time to move from mumblin' and grumblin' street to the corner of thankful and grateful!"

Bessie taught her children to live by the manna principle: it's raining bread! Once you get the complaints out of your system, you can start being thankful and grateful. There are three elements in God's manna principle.

- We will have **enough for everyone**, and everyone gets the same amount.
- We will have enough for **just one day at a time**.
- Everything we have is **given by God**, not by our own efforts.

When we live by the manna principle, we put our faith in God, not the market economy. We know these are tough times, but our biblical faith was **born** in tough times!

When we live by the manna principle, we don't see scarcity. We see abundance. Forget about the recession: It's raining manna, hallelujah!

When we live by the manna principle, we have faith that there will be **enough for everyone**, just **one day at a time**, and that **everything we have** comes from **God's extravagant generosity!**

I was called to this congregation three years ago in October 2008, just when the recession hit all of us like an atom bomb. "Welcome to your new church," God said to me, "and by the way, it's stewardship season!"

I didn't have time to look back and I didn't have time to complain, and I have to tell you, I have seen God's Spirit at work in the financial responsibility of this congregation over the last three years. It's raining manna, hallelujah! The leaders of this church have shown incredible faith in so many ways:

1. We took our pastoral housing fund, which we were treating like a checking account, and put it into our general endowment fund so that we won't drain it dry.
2. We took our outstanding capital expenses of about \$167,000 from the renovation that was completed five years ago, and we put it into a principal-and-interest loan that we will pay off over the next several years.
3. We made it a goal to contact every single member and ask for a pledge, no matter how big or how small that may be.

4. Our planned giving committee is working with me to visit every church member and ask them to make a gift to the church in their estate plans, to provide for long-term strength.
5. We took memorial funds that were sitting on our books, unused, and we invested them in mission work.
6. At this week's Council meeting, our elders will consider a proposal to reduce the annual draw from the endowment fund from a five-year rolling average of 6% this year to a 5% next year, to preserve the corpus of the funds for the future.

All of these actions take courage, faith and trust during an economic recession.

This congregation has faith in the manna principle: that we will have **enough for everyone**, just **one day at a time**, and that **everything we have** comes from **God's extravagant generosity**, not our own efforts.

As the Israelites learned, God was not only with them in the **extraordinary** crossing of the Red Sea, but God continued to feed and sustain them in the **ordinary** events of everyday life, by providing daily bread through their long journey through the wilderness.

When God first started raining bread, the people had never seen anything like it before, so they turned to each other and said, "man hu?" which means, "What is it?" It was manna, raining bread from heaven. Often we don't even recognize God's presence in our lives, because we think life is all about us and our own efforts. We forget that **God provides everything we need. God leads us and feeds us** as we walk through life's wilderness.

I have a friend I'll call Lee who has had a difficult life. Though he is very talented, intelligent and accomplished, he has had to face some crises that left him hanging on the ropes like a fighter who's taken a beating.

Through all of this, Lee has wrestled with his faith in God. Lee knows the Bible backwards and forwards, and he knows the church inside and out. But he still doesn't understand why things have happened the way they did, and he is not afraid to complain to God about it.

One day Lee was so angry he took the silver cross necklace that he always wears, and he ripped it off his neck. He shouted at God, "I've had it! I'm through with you. I'm done with this!" and Lee threw the cross necklace out the window of the building where he lives and threw it into the street.

That gave him a feeling of catharsis, and he went on with his life. When Lee looked in the mirror, he noticed the cross wasn't there, and he was glad not to wear it any longer. It was just a symbol of his disappointment in God.

A few weeks later, Lee went to pick up the mail in the lobby of his building, and saw that something was hanging from his mailbox. He went closer and realized it was his cross necklace, the same one he had thrown out the window weeks ago.

Lee picked it up, in disbelief, and looked more closely at the cross. It wasn't exactly the same. It looked like a Mack truck had driven over the cross, and two of the bars were bent and almost broken. But there it was. Back again. There was no envelope, no note. It simply appeared.

He straightened the arms of the cross and put the necklace back on. Lee wears that cross today, bent and broken, but still bearing witness.

God is with us, even in the wilderness. It's raining manna, hallelujah!
Amen.

