



First United Church of Oak Park

Lessons From the Wilderness

Exodus 16: 13-18

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September 13, 2020

This is a wilderness story. The people were in the wilderness and it stretched out far beyond what anyone could see. And the wilderness was a place of danger, a place where survival was a struggle and not a certainty. They had run through their food stores, and the people were hungry. They were hungry for bread and they were hungry, too, to return to how things were, a return to normal when they would work and work and work and work endlessly, but they had food. Hunger for bread is a simple enough need to address, and God set out to provide for them.

God made manna appear all over the ground: the bread from heaven. It was a bit odd as bread goes. It would appear all over the ground in the morning, white like frost in color. And the texture was sort of like coriander seeds. Think of waking up to seeing the ground covered in panko bread crumbs as far as the eye could see — just an endless expanse of bread waiting to be collected. A bit odd, as bread goes. But nevertheless, God provided for their hunger for bread.

As for their other hunger, the hunger that things might return to normal, that's much harder to address. But God sought to address that, too. There is one little detail in this story of the manna, one little detail that shows how God was tending to the people's spiritual hunger in the wilderness for a return to normal: how much manna each person was able to collect.

The Bible says that on the first day that the manna appeared, the Israelites went out to gather it. And, the Bible says, some of the Israelites who went out gathered more, and some gathered less. No surprise there. The young and strong were probably able to gather more than the elderly and infirm, the hale and hearty were probably able to gather more than the sick.

Exodus 16: verses 17 and 18 say, "Some of the Israelites who went out gathered more manna, and some gathered less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing more, and those that gathered little had no shortage. Each had gathered as much as was needed." One omer. I'm a

sucker for biblical weights and measures; I love this stuff, it's so interesting. One omer is about eight cups.

So that means that each person got the equivalent of eight cups of bread crumbs per person per day — which is plenty of bread crumbs! But more than the amount, what is amazing is that those who gathered a great deal because they were young or healthy or ambitious — they wound up with one omer. And those who gathered much less — because they were old or infirm or just tired — they wound up with one omer. Everyone got what they needed, not more, not less. One omer. That is how much manna each person collected.

People did not have to work themselves to exhaustion to have enough and, in fact, working to the point of exhaustion did not provide the benefit one might imagine. And being slower, taking more time, being weakened, needing rest: This did not result in the disaster one might imagine. What everyone got? One omer. The people were hungry — hungry for bread, true. But hungry also for a return to normal when they would work and work and work and work endlessly, but at least they had food.

The manna from heaven was God's way to respond to this desire that things should return to normal. Not by giving the people endless work again, but by teaching them a new lesson. There are limits to how much a person can do in the wilderness. And beyond those limits, more work does not lead to thriving. Work and work and work and work and work yields at the end still: one omer. Limits must be drawn — limits can be drawn. It's okay to slow down.

This is a wilderness story. It is a wilderness story we read in the Bible and it is a wilderness story we are living today. We are in the wilderness, and it stretches out far beyond what anyone can see. And this wilderness we are in, it is a place of danger, a place where survival is a struggle and not a certainty.

Since the pandemic began six months ago, I have seen so many people hungry. There is the hunger I see in the longer lines at the food pantry, yes. People are hungry for bread, and this must be provided, and it is right for a church to devote a great deal to that effort, as we are. But people are hungry, too, for a return to normal. And that line, of those who are hungry for THAT — that line stretches farther than I can see, and I am surely standing in it, too.

Our youth and teenagers, school interrupted and lives interrupted and just at the moment when every fiber of their being cries out to be close with friends, it is just then they are told they cannot be together, cannot grow, must hit pause. Hunger.

Our parents with kids at home, working from home and schools closed down or all-online, full-time parenting and full-time job responsibilities, burning the candle at both ends and just feeling like a failure at everything with no end in sight. Hunger.

Our empty nesters seeing grown children out living life in a world that is dangerous in the extreme, and unable to protect them at a moment when protecting them would mean the world. Hunger. Our members who are out of work, seeing staggering unemployment numbers and wondering where there can be a place for them. Hunger. Our retirees, and those living alone, our elders and those with illnesses that make them more vulnerable — they have seen weeks turn to months turn into half a year of isolation, of purpose and ritual taken away. Hunger. The line of those hungry for a return to normal stretches farther than I can see, and I am surely standing in that line, too.

It's gathering day. And my instincts as a preacher tell me that I should offer something grand and challenging, throw down the gauntlet for a year of working for the furtherance of the gospel, challenge each of you to make this year one that holds great works of faith for each of you and for all of us collectively. But this is a wilderness story. It is a wilderness story we read in the Bible and it is a wilderness story we are living today. And the manna from heaven, the bread that God provides: It carries a lesson for us.

It's okay to slow down. As much as I want to be able to go back to normal, I cannot live as if things are normal. Things don't work that way anymore. There's only so much Zoom anyone can do, only so many hours of productivity that can be squeezed in. If I try to push beyond those limits — when I push beyond those limits — I find the profit strangely thin. I haven't done as much as it seems I should have been able to, and the next day dawns with me tired and grumpy and still hungry for a normal that is no closer for my frantic efforts the day before.

It's okay to slow down.

Because there are limits to how much a person should work, CAN work. You don't have to work yourselves to exhaustion, and working to exhaustion will not provide the benefit one might imagine. Being slower, taking more time, being weakened and needing rest, this will not create the disaster one might imagine.

It is okay to slow down. Not to do as much as you did before. This is a wilderness story. A story we are living through — together.