

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 13, 2015

Generous God, Generous People

Exodus 16:1-15

Scan through the channels on your TV these days, and you'll probably come across some type of show where somebody is trying to survive in the wilderness. The wildly popular "Survivor," now on the verge of its 31st season, paved the way for a whole string of shows where an individual, a pair of people, or in most cases a small group of folks, leave behind a reasonably comfortable life and venture into remote, hostile, and dangerous territory, with few if any supplies. "Extreme Survival," "Man Versus Wild," "Naked and Afraid," "Out of the Wild," "Survivorman," and on the list could go. These are just some of your options if you enjoy watching ordinary people trying to test their endurance, challenge their resourcefulness, and push their inner strength to its limits.

During his recent Alaska trip, President Obama even took some time to film an episode of "Running Wild with Bear Grylls." Just this week, a clip of the show was released showing the President eating part of a bear's leftovers, in this case a bloody carcass of half-eaten salmon. Stay tuned this fall if you want to see the entire episode and watch our nation's chief executive operate in conditions far different than the formality and comfort of the Oval Office. "This has got to be one of the best days of my Presidency," said Obama while filming the show. "First of all, I'm not in the office. Second of all, I'm not in a suit." He also pointed out, "I've seen some of the stuff Bear eats, and it's gotta be something that doesn't still have its legs and eyes on it. I want it not to be too recognizable."

"What is it?" That's probably one of the questions that President Obama, or any of the men and women on a survival show, ask most often. "What is it?" That's also one of the key questions that comes up in today's Scripture passage from Exodus. At the end of our text, the Israelites stand there staring at what's described as "thin flakes like frost on the ground" (v. 15). We call it "manna," a word that comes from the Hebrew term *man hu*, which means, "What is it?" Descriptions elsewhere in the Bible suggest that this fine, flaky substance came from plant lice that fed on the local tamarisk trees. The lice excreted a yellowish-white juice that was rich in carbohydrates and sugar. The downside of this food is that it quickly rots under the heat of the sun and attracts ants. To this day, there are still groups of nomadic people who gather manna early in the morning and bake it into bread. Nobody knows better than they do what daily bread is all about.

That's how God told the Israelites that he would take of them. It would be day by day by day by day. The Lord told Moses to tell the people, "At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God" (v. 12). There's no camera crew following them around in the desert, capturing their struggle to survive. There's no preview at the end of each chapter of Exodus, saying, "Tune in to next week's episode of 'Israelites in the Wild,' when Moses and Aaron finally run out of patience and demand to be choppered back to civilization." No, for God's people, this wasn't about TV ratings or a cash prize waiting at the end of their ordeal. This was about their relationship with God's designated leaders, and with God himself, who had apparently rescued them from one place of suffering and oppression, only to plop them down in a place that seemed just as brutal, threatening, and hopeless.

It's not surprising, then, that the people soon registered a protest with their leaders. As one person has put it, the Israelites were asking "Where is the all-you-can-eat buffet that we enjoyed in Egypt?"¹ Now, was it really that good for them in Egypt, or is this just a case of the sufferings of the past not looking as bad compared to the sufferings of the present? That could be part of it. Plus, hunger has a way of changing how you see things. To be honest, most of us only experience this on a fairly minor level. For instance, when we have to miss a meal, or maybe change our diet for medical reasons. In some cases, we're more like the reality depicted in the Snickers candy bar commercials, where a grumpy person in a troublesome situation is portrayed by a famous actor. After the actor eats a Snickers bar provided by a concerned friend, he or she is "better" again. As the ad slogan says, "You're Not You When You're Hungry."

Granted, that's minor compared to the level of hardship that the hungry and thirsty Israelites were facing. But even so, there's no doubt that being in the wilderness, deprived of food and water, was coloring their recollection of what things were like under the thumb of Pharaoh. They're starting to talk about life in Egyptian bondage as if it were the "good old days." They're losing sight of the fact that Pharaoh's tyranny over them meant death, while God's salvation of them meant life. It's true that the risks and dangers the Israelites are facing in the wilderness are immediate, and life-threatening, but those risks and dangers are also causing them to forget that God really did rescue them and will provide for them.

The good news is that their complaining and their faulty memory don't diminish God's care for them. He still hears their cries for help, and responds to their need. The Israelites soon realize that they're not alone in the wilderness. God has shown up, with plenty of food in hand. At first, they don't recognize it, so Moses has to explain: "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat" (v. 15).

One of the reasons God gives us an anniversary Sunday like today is so that we don't forget where our bread comes from. Though we are God's people, rescued from captivity to sin and death through Christ, we're still susceptible to a faulty memory. As long as we're still on this wilderness journey from our deliverance in Christ to our destination in Christ, we're prone to forgetfulness. So we need to gather every Lord's Day, and especially on this Sunday, to recall with gratitude how the glory of the Lord has been among us, and how the Lord has opened the doors of the heavens and rained down manna on us as a congregation of his people.

Pacific Garden Mission, in Chicago, Illinois, is the oldest, continuously operating rescue mission in the country. Early on in its history, the mission was led by a couple named George and Sarah Clarke. They reached a point in their work where there wasn't enough money in view to pay the rent. This was especially troubling to the Clarkes in view of how the ministry was growing and more and more lives were being transformed by the gospel. Though they weren't discouraged, the Clarkes did begin to wonder how God could let them come into such financial straits when they had been working so faithfully in the ministry. Even so, they decided that the best course of action was to trust and pray. The obligation needed to be met promptly, so the Clarkes prayed all night long for the Lord to send them rent money.

When they stepped out of their house the next morning, they spotted something that others have described as a nineteenth century version of manna from heaven. Their yard was covered with mushrooms of the highest quality, appearing in advance of their regular season. The Clarkes gathered and sold the mushrooms to chefs at the legendary Palmer House hotel. Turns out there was enough money to pay the rent, as well as meet some

other ministry expenses. Thirty-five years later, in her booklet, "God Is Love," Sarah Clark commented, "No mushrooms were ever seen there before—nor any since."

Here at Grace Baptist Church, we may not have manna from heaven stories as remarkable as that one, but we do have a nearly six-decade history of how God has faithfully provided nourishment for us and resources for the ongoing mission of our congregation. Today in particular, we come together to remember and reflect on how God has given our church the sustenance it needs, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, especially in those times when our route to the kingdom has passed through dangerous territory and we wondered which direction to go, and how we were going to make it.

But the goodness, compassion, and generosity of the Lord haven't failed, and our manna, our daily bread, continues to appear in a multitude of forms. We have a gospel story to tell. We have a place to gather. We have a community to serve. We have fellow believers to work with. We have songs to sing. We have prayers to say. We have Scriptures to read. We have the Word to preach. We have money to give. We have material resources to share. We have a mission to complete. We have all these things, and everything else, that goes into being the liberated people of a life-giving God.

And all these things that give our church life aren't meant to be handled selfishly, but generously. We're not only supposed to remember that our bread comes from God, but what kind of God he is. A God whose doesn't keep his glory to himself. A God who doesn't hold onto the riches of heaven for just himself. A God who doesn't stockpile the goods of the kingdom for just himself. No, today's story from Exodus, like so many other parts of Scripture, shows us that God is not a hoarder. He opens the doors of his own treasure house, and showers our life together with the things we need to move forward, to make progress, and to show the world what his will and his way look like.

Remember that there's more to the story than just the giving of manna. As we read further into Exodus 16, we see how God not only gives the bread of heaven but also instructions about how to gather it, distribute it, and share it. God tells his people not to gather more than one day's worth of manna. Just what's needed for that day, and no more. On the day before the Sabbath, they can gather twice as much, so that they have enough to carry them through the Sabbath itself. But as with our own ways and habits, so it was with the Israelites. Some of them attempted to stockpile what God had provided. Or as one preacher has put it, they tried to "Tupperware the manna." But that just did more harm than good, because that wasn't the way God meant it to work.²

That's because a generous God intends to form a generous people. He didn't rescue us from sin and deliver us from death so that we could each secure ourselves at the expense of others. He saved us so that we as his people, his church, could be a visible, living alternative to the world's ways of hoarding, accumulating, and relying on human resourcefulness, rather than relying on the faithfulness, goodness, and provision of God. So today, on our fifty-seventh anniversary, we pause to remember our congregation's daily dependence on the Lord, to recognize our own failure to share his riches, and to pray that he will patiently move us forward in our mission of showing forth his generosity in Christ.

¹ Blog by Peter Marty. Day 1 website. November 8, 2011. Accessed September 10, 2015 <http://day1.org/3388-dr_peter_marty_10_bible_stories_that_breathe_life_stockpiling_life>.

² Blog by Peter Marty. Day 1 website.