

Sufficient for the Day

Text: Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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I love when a biblical story fits the form of a free verse poem . . . as in these words of Barrie Shepherd¹ - poet, pastor, prophet and Presbyterian preacher.

*While they wandered in the wilderness, Lord,
you fed your people with the gift of manna from the skies,
bread falling from heaven, new every morning,
sufficient for the day and only for that day,
to be eaten in joy and thanksgiving
and never stored up for tomorrow.*

*And for those who doubted
and sought to stockpile your bread of life,
their stash turned foul by the next morning.*

Barrie's words are so spare in contrast to the number of verses that Exodus employs in telling us of the same event. But in either form - poetry or verse - it's a beautiful, inquisitive, formative story in the heart of our faith.

Surely you know at least the edges of it. At center are a people who, in the midst of their life's way, feared their basic needs would not be met. They were tired, hungry and thirsty; and imagining that things could only get worse.

More yet, their growing discontent caused them to become a complaining lot. The story says they murmured against Moses and also against God. They were a grumpified lot, if I might invent a word. Some even wished they were dead.

Yet that did not stop God from doing something breathlessly compassionate and generous. She did not chafe at their murmuring but instead made bread fall from the skies; bread plenty enough for the day ahead; amply abundant for each and all.

It was an act of radical abundance in response to their fear of scarcity; a counter to their perception that their needs didn't matter; a corrective to their distortion that there would not ever be enough to sustain them along their way.

So this instead: An unexpected gift of grace rained down from the heart of God to the fearful hearts of her people. Take. Eat. There is plenty and enough to for the day with the assurance that more would come in the morrow.

I wonder if it has been so for you? That fear and fret have cunningly convinced you that you have not enough of whatever you think you need: bread or courage or hope; talents or money or faith or resilience to make life work out? Has it never been so in your life?

But then something delivers you a larger share of the truth; and you find that you do have enough, that scarcity is not your narrative, and that the grace of God will provide in ways that surprise you every time? This is where the truth of our story touches down today.

But then, as it so often is with the Bible, the whole thing takes another and deeper turn. We learn that our cousins of long not only snatched up bread for the day, as had been given, but then tried store any extra away in their own hidden surplus.

No finger pointing! It's so darn human a thing to do. It's hard for most of us to trust in the generosity and grace of God repeating itself. So God added this to the moment: the bread that rained down had a shelf life and would go bad by nightfall.

Marilyn MacEntyre was in church one Sunday morning when the preacher asked folks to take the blank 3 x 5 card that had been enclosed in their worship bulletins. It got testier when he instructed the next step, which was to write a six-word autobiography.

They were focusing on the same story we have before us, the Bible real-time. And, as you may remember from Robert's reading the whole congregation murmured, this time not only at God but at the preacher! Can you even fathom such a thing?

But Marilyn found herself writing these words: "Eat the manna. More will come." It dawned on her that the passage was about her fear of scarcity, of never having enough, and of lacking the assurance of a rainy day plan.²

Ephemeral is a word that we don't often use. It refers to gifts that last only for the brief time to which they are assigned. Ephemeral. Think of a moment of great beauty or love or the kind of things that cannot be stored and collected for another day.

So, the passage from Exodus affirms that the gifts of God are provisions of grace; but with them comes the lesson, a kind of Torah, that some gifts are only for a brief time and not to receive and share them in a timely way means they will be forever lost.

One more turn with this. Because if the text of the story takes us from grace and generosity freely given – even to grumpy people; and challenges us to shift our posture from scarcity to abundance; and then encourages us to trust in each day's gifts as enough – if that's the text . . . then the subtext is about the arithmetic of God.

And that's exactly it! The red-thread of truth deeply woven into the fabric of this lesson is to learn deeper and again to embrace our lives ever so daily with trust in God's compassionate grace, with the assurance that there is enough here for now, and more will be coming later.

It is just as Wendell Berry once wrote:

*"The only economy that will last is God's.
To be in one's right mind
is to know the right use of gifts;
to ask for more than is given,
to take more than is given back
is to have less,
and finally, nothing."³*

So let's circle back to the free verse poem with which we began. Because it provides a mirror for us – as we enter into these next few weeks and our season of giving right here at First Church – and our own struggle in balancing our fear of scarcity with the larger truth of abundance. Barrie Shepherd again:

*Early this morning, Lord,
I rise to gather the fresh manna of your love.
Fill me now to overflowing
with the strength, the grace and the truth I will need for the tasks ahead.
Then go with me to ensure that I give these gifts away,
that I spend them all as currency for this day,
guarding no store for the morrow,
sharing your gifts in all that I do, all that I am,
lest, like manna of old my stored abundance turns to waste.*

Please: may our ears open to the lesson of it all; our hands free to both receive and give; our minds intent on the balance that God has in mind between plenty and want; and our hearts trust in the grace that knows no bounds.

May it be ever so. In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd. *Diary of Daily Prayer*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002, p. 39.

² Century Marks, "Just Enough" in *Christian Century*, May 28, 2014, pp. 8-9.

³ Wendell Berry. *A Small Porch*. Counterpoint Books, 2016, p. 39.