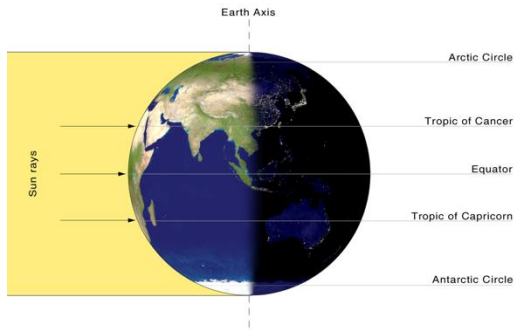


“Bread from heaven”

Exodus 16:1-15 (September 24, 2023)



Yesterday at 12:30 a.m., the autumnal equinox arrived. Which is to say, the beginning of fall. Today, the hours of daylight and darkness will be roughly the same. But I have to warn you: We’re on a downward slope, with days growing shorter, and temperatures dropping.

Of course, this happens every year. And when it does we know our gardens will be coming to an end. We’ve already had one frost warning. There will soon come a time we have to give them up. When do we say, “It’s no longer worth the effort”?

Lindsay, is almost there already! But I say, “Not yet.” I fear some day she’s going to give up on *me*! Hopefully no time soon!



The Israelites, on their journey to the promised land, were ready to give up. Just one month after their miraculous escape from Egypt – remember our sermon last Sunday? Now we find them full of complaint.



Some want to return to their place of captivity. They have a distorted memory of how great things were under the reign of Pharaoh. “Remember when we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread?” they say.

Really? When you were slaves? Are you sure about that? Lounging around, smelling delectable food, relaxing with your neighbour?

We have this remarkable tendency to look back and remember things not quite as accurately as they really were. We pine for the “good-old days”. But our memory is selective. If you’d asked the Hebrews two months earlier what their life was like, you might have heard a *different* story.



This is not to say that life in the wilderness was a piece of cake. I too would be wondering: “Where is Moses taking us? Where is this promised land?” I’d scan the desolate horizon and ask myself, “How on earth are we going to survive?”

“You’ve brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” They cannot see their way through. So very soon into their journey, the Israelites are ready to give up.



In response, God promises to do even better than their Egyptian dining experience. Bread and meat is promised. And not just a little. “I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you,” says the LORD.

You've heard the expression, "It's raining cats and dogs." Well, this is raining bread. Which means there's going to be a downpour, plenty for everyone.



Not scarcity and starvation, but abundance and full stomachs for all. If they think Pharaoh's reign was so good, just wait and see what *God's* reign will bring.



But in order to thrive in this wilderness, they will have to practice some new ways, adopt a different pattern to their living. Their old life is finished now. They are no longer slaves and brick-makers. They are servants of the High King.

In order to be God's people, our lives need to undergo a transformation. The theological word is "sanctification." Day by day, as we journey in our faith, our lives are being re-shaped and re-formed. And this is not always an easy process!



What's the greatest lesson you ever learned? Was it easy? Or was it learned in the face of *hardship*? God is *in* that place of hardship! As Moses and Aaron spoke to the people "they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud." God is with them!



"At evening quails came up and covered the camp."

A few weeks ago, Lindsay and I were camping in the East Block of Grasslands National Park. In the evening we sat down at our picnic table for supper. Just as we were about to begin, Lindsay motioned for me to have a look behind. What do think we saw?

There, appearing over the rise, was a flock of grouse. They seemed quite tame. We have discovered on other occasions that these are not the smartest birds on the prairie. It wouldn't be too difficult to catch one, I think. (But our supper was already prepared.)



Quails are considered game birds. But they are smaller than grouse, and often have a fancy plume on their heads. I assume they provided a tasty, high-protein diet for the Israelites.



When morning came, the people woke to find a layer of dew. When it lifted, a flaky substance remained, fine as frost on the ground.



They didn't know what to make of it. "What is it?" they asked. Which in the Hebrew language is "man hu?" And that's what it became known as: "Manna" – the food provided by God. "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

But notice: there are special qualities to this bread: It cannot easily be stored. Moses tells the people to only gather what they need. No more, no less. There will be enough for everyone. Don't try to hoard it or stash it away.

But you know what happened. That is *exactly* what some of them tried to do. And when they did, the manna became a foul rotting mess, infested with worms. Would you like some day-old manna? No thank-you!

When they followed instructions, there was plenty for all. God's economy is not like that of Pharaoh's, where it was everyone for themselves, an economy based on greed.

God's plan for the Israelites is one of *shared abundance*, with none left out, and no one collecting more than what is required. What would it look like if we applied these principles to our lives today?



I told you the Israelites would need to learn new ways in the wilderness. But listen now: Here's a way that was *really* new!

It's called Sabbath. The idea that we should take a break. We don't need to work our fingers to the bone, and our souls into the ground. We need to have a day of rest, just as God rested from the labour of creation.

On the sixth day God provided the Israelites with *twice* as much food. "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning."

So that's what they did. And guess what? None of it became foul! When the Israelites sat down for Sabbath dinner, the work was done already. All they had to do was *enjoy* it!



Are there places for joy in your life? Sitting at a table with family or friends, for example? What a gift that is!

The Sunday evening meal at our house has become something kind of special. We put extra leaves in the table. Our children and their spouses gather. There's a chair for our little granddaughter.



The kitchen gets loud sometimes. There's talk and laughter. I don't know if that pattern will go on forever. The time may come when busyness pulls us all in different directions. But for now, we receive it as a *gift!*



Sabbath, for the Israelites, was a time to step back from their long list of duties, as well as their anxieties ... and simply *trust* the work of God. If they were going to survive in the wilderness, that's what they would have to do: Let go of doubt. Trust God's provision. Allow the LORD to feed them. Exchange complaint for gratitude.

Those are lessons we don't learn easily. And I guess you know the Israelites had to go over it many times. As do we. Because we forget. Or we grow fearful. Or we just want to do things for ourselves.

Some things, however, we cannot do for ourselves! We learn this lesson when we are very *young*, and again when we are very *old*. Our days are a gift from God. Not everything in the world is up to *us*, you know.



And this brings us to the final thing I want to point out, which is *endurance*.

The Israelites didn't realize it at the time. But they were going to be in the wilderness for a whole generation! And as good as Quails in the evening and Manna every morning might sound, I can't help but think they might have wanted an occasional adjustment to the menu.

Forty years is a long time to be wandering! Especially when they want to call it quits after just one month. 30 days is *nothing* in the great grand scheme of God!



Photo by Robert Engberg,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Riverhead_Forest_-_XTerra_Race_3.jpg

My son-in-law, Sam, is a trail runner. I struggle to see what the attraction is!

This summer he ran a marathon – almost 50 kilometres. He did it through mud, over rocks and rough terrain, up and down hills – and much of it in the rain! Does that make you want to sign up? I couldn't do that, even when I was his age.

The way forward for the Israelites will not be easy. Their faith will be *tested* in the wilderness. The challenges for them are not only physical and mental, but *spiritual* too. Sometimes they will fail. They will be unfaithful.

But they will learn, and they will *grow*. And best of all, God will stick with them!



Are there times you feel like packing it in? I know there are for me.

Some of you were at the funeral yesterday for Viola Schmidt, a member of our congregation. Viola lived to be a hundred years old!

When I think of some of the changes she has seen in that long life of discipleship, and some of the *challenges* she may have met along the way, it amazes me. There's someone who stuck with the journey and trusted God to the end!



We can never know what lies ahead. Other than this promise: There is a land *still* before us, where milk and honey flows. A good land that we have longed for. It will come.

And God will be *with* us on this journey, sustaining our lives through all the ups and downs, the times of hunger, tiredness, fearfulness, when we are tempted to turn back.



“Give us this day our daily bread,” Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Not all of it, all at once. But enough for *today*. This amazing bread that comes from heaven. Isn’t that exactly what we need? Amen.