

# Marveling at Manna

*A Sermon for Every Sunday*

Exodus 16:2-15  
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel E. Glaze  
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God had just delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, where they were Pharaoh's slaves for more than 400 years. Fresh in their minds was that spectacular experience at the Red Sea. You remember it, don't you? Israel, the people of God, came to the edge of the sea, with the Egyptian army breathing down their necks, and all of a sudden—miracle of miracles—the waters part to give them dry land to walk upon to the other side.

Now I don't mean to major on the minors here, but I've always been fascinated with one person in this story. Think for a minute about the person in the front of the line. Think about that first person to step onto the dry path with the huge walls of water on either side. "Go on, Bill—walk on out there. Looks dry to me!" "I don't know about that, Sue. What if the water comes crashing down again?"

What faith that must have taken!

Anyway, once the last of the Israelites stepped safely onto the banks on the other side of the sea, they turn around only to see that what Bill was worried about came true. That dry path they walked across became engulfed by crashing waters, drowning the Egyptian army.

This story is rather remarkable, isn't it? It's the kind of spectacular story you tell your children and your children's children.

But what comes next is equally spectacular, I think, but for different reasons. Shortly after the Israelites make it safely on the other side of the Red Sea comes the

episode found in today's reading from Exodus. Are the people of Israel dancing with joy over God's deliverance? Are they on their knees worshipping the one true God because God never abandoned them? No. They have forgotten. They have a sort of spiritual amnesia. They have forgotten who it was who actually delivered them to safety. So they bicker and complain to God, and to Moses and Aaron, their leaders.<sup>1</sup>

"Why did you bring us out of bondage?" they cry and complain.

Perhaps you've heard the story about a monk who joined a monastery and took a vow of silence. After 10 years of his service to the monastery in complete silence, his superior calls into his office and says that he will allow the monk to speak two words. He asks the monk if there's anything he'd like to say. "Food bad," the monk replied. And then it's back to silence. Another 10 years pass and the superior again calls the monk into his office and asks if he'd like to say two words. "Bed hard," the monk replied. So another ten years go by—30 years total—and again the monk is called in and asked if wants to say two words. "I quit," the monk says. The superior replies, "that doesn't surprise me one bit. You've done nothing but complain since you've gotten here!"

"Why did you bring us out of bondage?" they cry. "At least in Egypt we had enough to eat! But you have brought us out to the middle of God-knows-where, and now we're just going to starve to death!"

Can you believe it? They have been led from bondage to freedom and safety, and now they want to complain. If you ask me, at this point in the road trip, God should have pulled over, reached into the back seat, and dealt with the children.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hoffacker's [sermon](#) helped me form this introduction.

But God does not punish the Israelites. The people complain against God, and God responds with generosity. While the people complain with bitterness, God responds by providing.

What God provides is Manna. Well, to be accurate, what God provides is food from heaven, and when the Israelites see it, they say to each other, “Manna?” which means, literally, “What is this stuff?” So this food, this stuff, came to be known as Manna.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Manna is kind of like grits: a fine, flaky substance that nobody really knows what it is and it’s no good as leftovers.”<sup>2</sup> Everyday this Manna rained from heaven—and the Israelites were to only gather one day’s worth, because it would not keep. If they tried to hoard it, the Manna spoiled overnight. As a friend of mine puts it, God met their needs, but not their greeds. Only one day’s worth at a time.

Now the only exception to this was the Sabbath. The day before, God allowed them to gather twice as much as they needed and only then, it would last for two days.

This continued for 40 years—40 years, friends! Can you imagine eating the same thing every day for 14,600 days in a row? Personally, I can only do leftovers once, but this was how they survived until they reached the Promised Land. And so Manna became symbolic for the very real and physical ways God cared for the Israelites. It was an every-day-for-40-years miracle in which God provided what they needed.

Many people today are asking for God to provide. As I record this sermon for you, the earthquake in Morocco has claimed nearly 3,000 lives. In the US alone, more

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*.

than 1,000,000 deaths from COVID. Whether in Morocco, the US, each was a human being, beloved by God. Each death was a light gone out. Each death was a person who mattered, a person who had worth, a person whose family is grieving deeply. May God provide.

Many of you listening are grieving deaths of loved ones. Or maybe you're grieving the loss of a job, a career, a marriage, a dream. I join you in praying that God will provide.

You don't need me to tell you that in the US, we are a bitterly divided people—not just politically, not just socio-economically, but perhaps most starkly, we are divided racially. While this division is not new, it continues to be laid bare before us. Inequality abounds in housing, income, employment, education, incarceration. As brothers and sisters, children of God, beloved community, we have some serious work to do—many conversations to be had, much repentance and repair and reconciliation before us. We are praying that God will provide.

I have to tell you. By nature, I am an optimistic person. I proudly wear my rose-colored glasses. So call me naïve, but I believe the Manna miracles didn't just happen to the people of Israel many years ago. I believe the Manna miracle continues to this day—God is constantly providing good things to nourish us. God continues to provide all that we need. We just need to open our eyes, open our hearts, and open our hands to receive it.

I read recently that years ago, the generations before us would often go out walking, usually in the late afternoon or early evening. Sometimes they walked alone, sometimes a couple, sometimes the whole family. But in some parts, they didn't call it

“going for a walk,” they called it “going marveling.” Have you ever heard of this? I must have missed something, because I had never heard this before. *Going marveling*.

They would walk around their homes, along the creek, through a path in the woods, and they would look for unusual rocks, wild flowers, crawfish, four-leafed clovers, all sorts of marvelous things.<sup>3</sup>

They slowed down and went marveling. They opened their eyes, their hearts, and their hands to marvel at all God had provided.

As we face the uncertainty of the future, as we wonder what church will look like in five, ten, fifteen years, as we grieve the loss of loved ones, as we engage conversations about racial justice, as we work toward the day when all God’s children live in true freedom, in the midst of all that, God will provide. In faithfulness, we believe that God will provide.

That’s why we gather for worship—in a sanctuary, at home, wherever. We gather to praise God who gives us everything that we need, to celebrate God who calls us to put into practice God’s will on earth as it is in heaven, and to worship God who walks with us every step of the journey.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock tells this beautifully in *Craddock Stories*.