



“God’s Abundance”

Exodus 16:2-15

October 4, 2020

At the dawn, our eyes are fixed on you in gladness.

These words, part of a prayer written by a former professor of mine, have become a kind of morning meditation for me. As many of you know, I spent some time this week in an intentional and prolonged pause. As one friend put it, I chose to exit the rushing current of so-called normal life and sit on the banks for a bit. In those days, I made two personal discoveries that I imagine may have some resonance for you as well. The first was what a tremendous gift it can be to step away from those raging rapids—to leave the screens off and read a book, take a hike...or even a nap. At times, this kind of basic care for our own souls can seem like selfish indulgence or laziness. The deeper truth is that it is difficult if not impossible to show compassion for others when we have none for ourselves. We cannot give what we do not have. Or, as another seminary professor once observed, “If the shepherd is not fed, the shepherd tends to eat the sheep.” So, one discovery was the gift and necessity of prayerful pause.

The other was no less helpful but I must confess that it was less welcome. Sabbath is difficult to practice. There is a reason why it is the most routinely broken of the Ten Commandments for many of us. We who are hyper-connected and hyperactive struggle with all kinds of existential angst when we step away for a bit. Everything that we have been out running in our frenzied lives has a way of catching up with us when we slow the pace. It’s not always pretty. We struggle with purpose and meaning, personally or universally. We reflect on our motives and actions and are faced with our limitations and struggles. And, at a deeper and often unspoken level, we doubt the providence of God.

As people of faith, we often say to one another something like, “God provides.” And each of us could tell personal stories of the truth of this statement. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are full of stories of God’s provision. But the abstract truth of those words and the witness of scripture are not always enough for us. Faced with the choice to trust God or take care of ourselves (a false choice, I know), most of us would go with the latter.

At the dawn, our eyes are fixed on you in gladness. And yet, the prayer continues...before the day ends, we will look away from you. Our gladness gives way to bitterness and our trust fades.

It’s an ancient and timeless story. Through God’s extraordinary providence and grace, the Israelites have been miraculously liberated from slavery in Egypt and have made their way into the wilderness, led by the spirit of God in the form of fire and cloudy pillar. They are on their way to the Promised Land, free at last from the tyranny of Pharaoh. They have experienced the unmatched power of God, seen it firsthand. *Our eyes are fixed on you in gladness.* But that was several chapters ago. Memories are short and physical needs are far more tangible than the spiritual reality that Moses keeps preaching.

By chapter sixteen, the people have grown hungry and weary in the wilderness. They begin to complain (the word appears seven times in these fourteen verses) about God and their leader Moses. They are annoyed, exhausted, and afraid. They throw a pity party—forgetting the God of abundant grace who got them this far, they suggest that perhaps they have been led into the wilderness to die of hunger.

Isn’t it amazing how quickly our soaring faith can come crashing down? How rapidly our gratitude turns

to anxiety? How swiftly that Sabbath shine of gladness in God's presence gives way to doubt—was that even real...was it all an illusion? Where is God *right now*? The Israelites are our representatives in this story, and I for one can identify with their struggle to believe despite all that they have seen and experienced. My spiritual life resembles this struggle, what Barbara Brown Taylor describes as "lunar" faith, the kind that waxes and wanes with changes in context or circumstance. Can you relate to this lunar faith?

You heard the rest of the story beautifully read by our youth. Early one morning, the Israelites come out of their tents and discover an odd flaky substance covering the ground like dew. They ask, "What is it?" In Hebrew, the question sounds like this: "manna." And manna becomes its name. What is it? The answer is abundance.

It is a beautiful story, a powerful assurance of God's provision that we need to hear. When we are overcome with anxiety about the future or engaged in relentless self-pity, we would do well to remember the truth of abundance. The truth of abundance is that God *is* in control, that God is alive and active in the world. That the God whose power covers all the world is also gracious and loving and kind. The reason we worship each week is to be reminded of this truth. It is so easy to forget in the frantic busyness and disappointments of everyday life. We worship to remember the abundance of God preserved in stories like this one and in our own narratives as well. This story reminds us that God's providence is not dependent on the consistency of our faith.

This afternoon, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we will all be invited to God's table of abundant grace. We will be reminded that the table of our Lord Jesus Christ is the largest table in all the world—a truth that has new meaning this particular year. I had a vivid reminder of that truth earlier this year when we celebrated our first "virtual" communion. I had planned to celebrate the sacrament by video in our home where the connection is strongest, but it was such a gorgeous summer evening

that I simply had to be outside. I chose a spot in the yard. I prepared the elements. Communion would commence at 7:30 pm. At 7:27 pm, our wonderful neighbor opened his garage door and pushed the lawnmower out. Sara graciously ran over to ask if he could wait fifteen minutes. So, Doug and his twin sons just graduated from high school, stood at the edge of the yard to watch this strange ritual. At 7:29 pm, our wonderful neighbor on the *other* side let the dog out to play fetch. The dog stood at the fence staring at us. I proceeded, surrounded by friends, neighbors, a panting dog, and the beauty of creation. Finally, as I broke the bread, our son Ben drew close to the table. He smiled. I raised my eyes in hopes of scaring him back into the house. He came around the table. I slowly shook my head, "no." I thought he had relented when, from under the table, I saw a hand reaching for the bread. It was...beautiful. It was abundance. In fact, later when I asked why he had reached for the bread, Ben said, "There was enough for me." He was right. Enough for all of us.

Most Biblical scholars agree that Jesus had this wonderful story from Exodus in mind when he taught his disciples to pray to God, asking "Give us this day our daily bread." Give us, O God, what we need for *this* day. Tomorrow will bring new fears and anxieties, new possibilities, and invitations. Help us focus on *this* day—to fix our eyes on you in gladness at *this* dawn.

But that is not the only message of this story. The assurance and promise of God's abundance have a practical purpose in our lives. This abundance is meant to shape us into a community reliant on God's grace *and* eager to share it generously with others.

The Israelites, after living for too long under the oppressive regime of Pharaoh, find it difficult to trust God's abundance. And so they greedily gather the manna up, but when they measure it, the writer of Exodus records, "those who gathered much had nothing over and those who gathered little had no shortage." When they try to hoard the gift of God, it turns sour and rots. Does that sound familiar? The message is clear. The abundance God provides must

be shared in order to be enjoyed. Pharaoh's myth of scarcity must be undermined by a community of grace and generosity. As people of faith, we are called to believe in the abundance of God so much so that we share it with one another and all of God's people. Our gratitude should lead us to generosity.

Next week, we will begin the annual season of the church we call stewardship or, more recently, commitment. Soon, you will receive a letter asking you to prayerfully consider the role this community of faith plays in your life and how you are called to respond. We'll spend the next three weeks reflecting on the abundance of God that we experience in and through this congregation and how this place has shaped our faith and given nourishment to our lives. We will remember the faithfulness of those who came before us and we'll take up our God-given call to this moment when communities of faith like this one have an essential role in the healing of our land and the sharing of God's abundance. Like manna, God's presence blankets this place. Like manna, we are called to offer it to one another and to a world in need.

When the Israelites discover this fine, flaky bread covering the ground, they ask "what is it?" Manna. In my previous congregation, I had the privilege of accompanying elders who took communion to homebound church members. On one of those visits, I went with two elders to share the sacrament of communion with Bill and Tye Hardman, members who lived in an assisted living facility in town. We had a wonderful visit with Bill, but it was clear throughout that Tye was struggling with confusion. When the time came for communion, we read scripture, prayed the Lord's Prayer and I spoke the words of Jesus—"this is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you." Then one of our elders approached Tye and gently handed her a small wafer. She took it in her hands, examined it for a moment, and then spoke words that were among the most profound I have ever heard: "what do I do with it?" Exactly.

What do we do with these abundant gifts of God?
How do we respond to this love in faithful ways?

What is it? Abundance. What do I do with it? Take and eat; pass it on.

Beloved children of God, with Christians all around the world, come to the table of abundance. Receive what you need...and some to share. Amen.