

What is It?

Exodus 16:1-3, 11-21

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

In the wilderness, it doesn't take long before the logistical problems begin. It has only been three days. Mariam's liberation song is still resonating in the air, when the people find themselves in another crisis: food. Where's the food going to come from? The question spreads like the flu. Where are we going to get food? They begin having regrets as memories flashback to Egypt. "Ah, remember Egypt?" they say as their mouths water. "Remember the taste of biscuits and gravy, smoked salmon and honey roasted almonds?" Their appetites made them forget they were slaves! Then the complaints spill out in "If only" language. If only we were back in Egypt. If only we had not listened to Moses. If only we were still under Pharaoh's provision, at least we wouldn't be hungry." In the wilderness it doesn't take long before the people begin to complain.

Begin with a confession: I would complain too. I get the "If only's." After God calls us down a path and then a few miles in, things start to get difficult, we are going to complain and be tempted to go back to the old way. "If only..." I was talking with a colleague who has been

doing a lot of funerals lately. It is a season stacked with hospital calls, managing family crisis, and a lot of singing *Amazing Grace*. She said she's beginning to wonder if God has called her into ministry just to bury people. "If only," she said, "If only I had never taken the call..." We get it. We too are called to follow the pillar of cloud and fire, but it doesn't always seem like God gives us what we need to make it. God calls us to transform our identities, love our enemies, combat systemic evils. But when we get a few steps into it we begin to feel the cost, the risk, maybe even the regret. And then the complaints spill out. "If only we knew what this church commitment was going to be, we wouldn't have said, 'yes.'" "If only we had more people on the committee who could help us." "If only...if only...if only..."

But catch this: God hears the people's protest and provides. It's as if their complaints unlock the hatch as the manna rains down from the sky. It might come as a surprise, but manna is not a noun in the Hebrew; instead, it is a question. In the original language the word we translate as manna means, "What is it?" When the flakey substance clustered on the ground, the assembly looked up to the heavens and asked, "What is it?" and God said, "Yes!" Every morning the parents would go out to gather a bowl of "what is it?" They would bring it home and prepare it as creatively as they could so their children would actually eat it. As they slid it in front of them, the children would grimace and ask, "What is it?" And their parents would say, "Yes!" Manna is not a noun—not something we possess—it's a question we wrestle with. What is it, O God, you are providing us with? What is it that you are calling us to do and be today? What is it I can do about the violence, the islamophobia, the white supremacy in the world? "What is it?"

So, let's engage the question: what is it for you? What is your manna? When it feels like we are doing the best we can and still not going anywhere, what is the manna that keeps you going? If you ever read the newsletter, sometimes there are thank you notes from people in the church who are in a wilderness time. They say thank you for the phone calls, the visits, the prayers. It's manna—keeps them going. Or as someone is journeying through cancer, weary from the chemo drip, a "Thinking of you" card arrives in the mail—it's manna. I once heard someone describe hearing a child's laughter as manna. Hearing some of our older timer's stories is manna, too. On NPR the other day they interviewed teenagers who marched last week for our planet—teenagers who organized from 112 countries. They put down their no. 2 pencils and congregated in front of legislative buildings demanding changes to better our world. Listening to their wisdom about why they were doing it gave me some hope. It was manna to keep me going. When the nights grow long. When we have lost something, or we have lost someone. What is it? What is the manna that keeps you going?

As we ponder, notice: with manna comes rules. Number one rule: There will only be enough for today. That's it, today. Manna can't be hoarded by the privileged. Manna is not a commodity to be packaged and sold at the local grocery store. If we attempt to save the leftovers for tomorrow's lunch, the bible says that it will grow worms. Every day, the manna comes as a daily gift and every day it expires. It's like our faith. Living into faith is a daily commitment. Trusting the God who wants to lead us into freedom is a daily commitment. Learning to let go of the things we cannot control is a daily commitment. Laboring up the steep hill for justice is a daily commitment. Building communities of authenticity and hope is a daily commitment. Trying to see the image of God in someone who refuses to see the image of God in me and others is a daily commitment. If you don't believe it, just talk to anyone who is in A.A. working the steps to

recovery and they'll tell you it is a *daily commitment*. Speak to any parent who has been-there-done-that or is being-there-doing-that, and they will tell you parenting is a *daily commitment*. Bend the ear of a couple married fifty or more years, still negotiating the relationship, and they'll tell you it is a *daily commitment*.

Now let's talk to the church: ask what it takes for the church to be the church in this time and place; ask what it takes for the church to offer its life in the name of compassion; ask what it takes to live into the ways of faith, hope, and love; ask what it takes to be a safe haven for the least, the last and the lost; ask what it takes to be a people transformed by the revolutionary good news of Jesus Christ, with the power of the Spirit of the living God...and the church will confess it is a *daily commitment*. It's not easy, but I bet it's why there are rules attached to the manna. There will only be enough for today. Because being God's people is a daily commitment. And these daily commitments require daily grace.

Beloved friends: right now, that grace is yours. So you might as well use today's 'what is it?' Because there will be a fresh batch waiting for you tomorrow. Praise be to God. Amen.