

I am continuing in a series of sermons that follows the Hebrews' pilgrimage from slavery in Egypt to living as a free people in the Promised Land. The only way they, and we, can get to that freedom is to take the hard road through the desert wilderness. You enter the desert season of life when you have to leave behind something that was well known and move toward something new—something that will require a change in you if you are to receive it. The desert journey is hard because it is so threatening. Resources are few; questions and anxieties are plentiful. In the desert season you discover you have no choice but to trust God, which is why it is the place where our souls are shaped, and we learn how to be free.

Last week, we followed the Hebrews through the Red Sea and as they then headed south down into the vast Sinai Desert. Three days later they ran out of water. The people cried out to Moses, who cried out to the Lord. And they were miraculously blessed with water. Six weeks later they ran out of food. The people again cried out to Moses, who again prayed to the Lord for the people. It is easy to think of the Hebrews as a bunch of whiners on the journey who have short memories of God's faithfulness and an amazing capacity for complaint. But today I want to challenge that perception by trying to put us in their sandals. When they left Egypt, the Hebrews had heard only a vague promise of freedom, which is something they knew nothing about for 400 years. There was a vague dream of a better life and vague talk about going to a "land of milk and honey." But what exactly did that mean? There was a vague process for leaving Egypt, which included no deliberations or congregational meeting for a vote. No one asked them if they wanted to go on this journey, and as far as they knew they left Egypt because they got kicked out by Pharaoh who was fed up with the plagues. But then he changed his mind and chased after them. The departure was all very confusing. They eventually heard that God traveled with the people, but in a cloud. Clouds are also vague, so God's presence wasn't very tangible. And the reassurances they would survive the journey were also pretty vague. Where exactly were the resources of food and water? This whole journey is a long passage through the vague and mysterious.

Vague is one of our least favorite adjectives. If you give a presentation at school or work, the last thing you want to hear is that you were vague. When I tried to explore theological mystery with my students do you know what response I most often got? "Is this going to be on the test?" When your young adult child announces an engagement to be married, and you ask about plans for their future, you don't want to hear something vague like, "We're going to live on love." Vague frightens us. That's why we like plans, strategies, numbers, details, maybe even a power point presentation. But just how effective have your plans really been so far on the journey through life? Are you now living the life you had planned when you left your parents' home? Or more likely, did some mysterious interruption to those plans redirect your path? A job was lost, a relationship was found, or fell apart, a move had to be made, another move—any of them could significantly trash your plans. Even when we get what we planned, like a marriage or a child, they almost never turn out to be what we had planned. Maybe as you look at your life today, you consider yourself blessed, and you're thankful God never settled for your plans. But along the way, the interruptions on the journey can terrify us.

So, yes, I understand why the Hebrews complained. They were heading south into a desert, the wrong way from the Promised Land, they were out of bread and water, and only had a vague promise God was with them and leading them to a future filled with hope. But it didn't look like hope at the time. It looked like they were going to die in the wilderness. If all of this happened to us, I'm pretty sure we would submit a complaint or two.

It is hard to give up control, which is mostly what our plans are about, and why we hold them so tightly. But when God leads us to a desert, to the in-between places, before we get to the place where we can see the blessed Promised Land, it is to teach us to open our hands to the holy mystery that will unfold along the way. However, in our text today the people are still holding tightly to the plan for life they used to have. When the road through the desert became hard, they began to romanticize the life they had in Egypt "where we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread." Their memories had already edited out the harsh slavery from which they were delivered.

When your life has been interrupted, you just want to go back to the way things used to be. We often criticize the vague mystery of the present tense by improving on the past, and say obnoxious things, like, “Back in my day...” We say that because the present day confuses us. But once you have entered the desert, there is no going back to who you were. Your future is waiting up ahead, and only the God of mystery can get you there.

Out of grace, God responded to the people’s anxiety about food in a very tangible way, with the daily blessing of manna. It was a fine flaky sort of bread, which appeared every morning. And it came with very clear instructions. Every family had to gather their own manna. They couldn’t store it up or hoard it, lest the worms eat it. So they had to gather it every day except the sixth day of the week, when they gathered enough also for the sabbath. It wasn’t much. But enough. Just enough to keep them going on the journey. This is a wonderful metaphor for how God cares for all of us along the way on the journey. The divine grace is given tangibly, daily, personally, sufficiently. And you have to trust the faithful care will be there again tomorrow morning, as sure as the sunrise. This is what Jesus had in mind in teaching us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” It is as if to pray, “No matter how hard I try to secure my life with money, exercise, work, I know, O God, only you can give me a life. And you will give it to me one day at a time.”

But the best reason for seeing the manna as a blessing comes from its name. The literal translation of manna from the biblical Hebrew is “What is it?” Fascinating. This means that every morning one of the parents would go out to gather the “What is it?” They would prepare it as creatively as they could, but there was no “What is it?” Helper back then. The family would sit at the table to eat, and the kids would ask, “What is it?” And the parents would sigh, and say, “Yes.” Then they would bow their heads to pray, “Thank you God for what is it?” So, day after day the people were being nurtured on the journey by taking in this question of vague mystery. What is it that we are doing out here in the desert? What is it that I have to leave behind? What is it that I am being led toward? What is it that we are becoming as a people? What is it that is so special about the Promised Land? That is because the spiritual life is nurtured not by getting answers, which don’t hold up for long, but by getting better questions. For example, it is easy to question if this miracle of bread in the desert really happened. But the better question is not did it happen, but does it happen? Will God provide for you, for us as a church, as a society, or as a world in trouble?

The question of what is it that God is doing perseveres all the way through the Old Testament, into the New Testament until we get to the sixth chapter of John, where Jesus identifies himself as the new manna. Jesus is claiming that he is the new “What is it?” This means heaven’s answer to the question is another question—but a better one. Now the question is what is it that Jesus is doing? For the Christians this is a better question precisely because in Jesus Christ, God was revealed so tangibly. Jesus is the God who came to us in the flesh, born like us, and he knew our frailty, yearnings, and temptations. He walked our dusty roads, fed our people who were really hungry, healed those who were really sick, and forgave our very real sins. His teaching about loving our neighbors, even our enemies, is painfully clear. I wish he was more vague about that, but I cannot escape his teaching about what love really means. On the cross he revealed that God was dying to love us. And in his resurrection, he gave us a new life from which we are never separated—not even by death. That is what Jesus is doing.

You were brought into the desert season of life to learn that the love of God in Jesus Christ is enough. It is sufficient even when there aren’t so many blessings attached, when there is just manna, and when there is just Jesus plus nothing else. Those who have discovered the sufficiency of that faithful love are already free because they no longer fear losing what they inevitably will lose in time.

When you discover that freedom, you have already discovered the Promised Land. Amen