“What is it?”

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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

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***Exodus 16:2-4;9-15***

***2The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3The 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.” 4Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 9Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” 10And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 12“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.’”***

***13In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15When 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.***

Some will say, that to Christians, the Old Testament (the part of the Bible before Jesus) only matters as far as it relates to the New Testament (the part of the Bible with Jesus). In other words, the Christian Bible includes the Old Testament as well as the New Testament only because we need it in order to make sense of the New Testament. That statement is not true, because it is too simple to convey how and why the text we find in the Bible ended up there. Certainly, Christians also recognize the power and beauty and value of the Old Testament itself.

However, one can see how that statement might come about. Jesus is the fulfillment of so many events and promises of the ancient prophets and ancient times. Jesus was a Jewish man so his own culture and heritage would be from a people whose lives were organized around all of the stories and rituals and words of the Torah, our Old Testament. Because those first five books of our Bible belonged to Jesus, they also belong to us. Jesus’ conversations with his disciples or with crowds often began with a reference to something from their religious culture and beliefs.

For example, in the gospel of John, chapter 6, the disciples are wondering how they too can do the works of God, like their ancestors did. They bring up the very scene from Exodus that Chris read for us this morning, and Jesus makes a statement that might be familiar to us.

Here is the example from John 6: 32Then Jesus said to the disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34The disciples said to Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always.” 35Jesus said to the disciples, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:32-35)

If Jesus is equating himself to the manna from heaven that came from God and sustained the Israelites during their time in the desert, we should understand a little bit more about that manna from heaven. It becomes impossible to know the power of Jesus’ words from the New Testament without knowing more about the Old Testament, in this case, manna from heaven.

The Exodus story as a whole tells of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and the covenant God made with them. At the beginning of today’s text, it is still early in the Israelites time in the desert. When escaping Egypt, Pharoah’s army was chasing the Israelites. The Lord helped Moses to separate the Sea into two so that the Israelites could pass across on dry land, and the Egyptian army was swallowed up by the Sea when it closed again. Being saved from the Egyptian army and experiencing the miracle of the parting of the Sea was a great thing. Moses sang a great song. Miriam sang a great song. But, soon they found themselves unable to find water, so they complained again about the harshness of the road to freedom that they were on. But God intervened again . “Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there by the water.” (Ex 15:27)

When we are on path that is difficult, every oasis of relief is a place of hope.

After Elim, the Israelites were on the move again, and found themselves so distressed that they complained to Moses again, even wishing they were back in Egypt in slavery. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Sometimes the devil you know seems better than the angel you don’t know.

The Israelites were in a tough position. They were slaves in Egypt, didn’t have any rights, didn’t have any agency of their own, couldn’t make any of their own decisions – of course they would want to be set free, right? The immediate need for food though, over-road their desire for a freedom that they did not yet have and could not imagine.

And this is where God was genius. God knew they needed food. But more importantly, the Israelites needed to learn how to trust God along the journey. So God set up a plan, through Moses that would meet *both* of the needs of the Israelites.

God promised them that they would have meat by night and bread by day, and sure enough, quail came around the camp each evening, and in the morning there was a dew on the ground, that they could collect and make bread. This was called manna. Food to fill the first need of the Israelites.

Just a few verses later in Exodus we hear the rest of God’s plan for the manna. The people are to collect only the manna they need each morning. By taking only what they needed, the Israelites were determining themselves that all of them would be cared for, by leaving enough for their neighbors. Take what you need. Don’t save it for later, it will get rotten and be unusable. This was God’s way of handing the Israelites those experiences they needed to learn to trust God along the journey. By only having enough manna for one day, they were forced to wait until the next day to get more. Instead of worrying each day, about tomorrow’s manna, they would see that God continues to provide day after day after day after day. Just as God promised.

By providing manna, God provided food. By providing manna in the way God did, God gave the Israelites experiences of God providing for them, one day at a time, over and over and over and over, teaching them from experience that God keeps God’s promises and God provides.

The Israelites thought they would prefer to go back to slavery where at least they were not hungry, because as they imagined a solution to their hunger, they could only think of getting food the old way – as a slave. Their imaginations were stunted because they hadn’t yet experienced what trusting God could do for them. They thought their options were starvation or return to slavery.

After experiencing God providing manna day after day after day, God gave them the other thing they needed: experiences of god’s faithfulness. With this as an additional option, they no longer only had the choices of hunger or slavery. They had a third choice: trust God.

This is a great lesson for us. Next time we are in need – ill, hungry, fearful, in danger, facing a crisis – we should use our imaginations, our memories, our experiences, our knowledge of the world to help us think sensibly and fully engaged. But remember, the most important thing about manna – *it was new*. When we can’t think of a solution, remember, that solution might be the new thing right in front of our eyes. These are things that eyes of faith can see.

The Israelites hadn’t seen it manna before, they didn’t know what it was. “What is it?” they said. The answer to their *hunger* was manna. That was the easy part. God provided more because God was ahead of them. God knew what they needed in the moment and what they would need in the future.

God’s genius in this story is a great example of God seeing the need behind the want. In that moment when they were completely reliant on things outside of themselves, they discovered as we do that when fully reliant on God, God comes through. Day after day they and we learn again and again that God is continually present, God is trustworthy, God provides that which is life-sustaining.

Sometimes knowing so much about the world is a setback because we *expect* to be able to know everything. We are not very good at being reliant. People use the word co-dependent too easily, and we begin to think that every time someone relies on us, we are being co-dependent. If we rely on someone else, that’s being needy, or that’s letting someone else do the heavy lifting. There is nothing wrong with being reliant. We rely on doctors, experts, parents, family, friends, other drivers! Our “lift yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality doesn’t allow for us to ask for or receive help. We forget that more than anything else, we are a connected people.

We may think that since we’ve never wandered in the desert, been chased by an entire army that was then swallowed by the sea, and been afraid for our survival that this text doesn’t apply to us. But it is not a stretch to look at our own lives and recognize the feeling of being trapped, the feeling of not knowing how to get out of a situation, or what to do next. There are some things we just can’t think our way out of – so include God in the conversation, always! We need to trust that if we look with eyes of faith, some new thing will be just what we need.

Amen.