

Text: Exodus 16: 1-15  
Title: Enough for the Day  
Date: 09.21.08  
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In the great American fable, “Forrest Gump” there is an altogether delightful moment when Bubba recounts the many ways to prepare shrimp:

*.... shrimp is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, sautee it. Dey's uh, shrimp-kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo. Pan fried, deep fried, stir-fried. There's pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich. That- that's about it.*

Well, after forty years, after fourteen thousand six hundred days, my guess is that the Israelites had a similar litany for manna. They had manna chips, manna tacos, seared manna and dill, smoked manna, manna moule sauce, manna wraps, manna stir fry...

But, on that first morning they didn't know what it was. In fact, one etymological route is that the name “manna” comes from the Hebrew *man hu* ~ which means “What is it?”

There has been a good deal of speculation about the fine and flakey frost that was no good as leftovers. The most common explanation is that a type of plant lice ~ that feeds on the fruit of the tamarisk tree ~ excretes a substance, a yellowish-white flake or ball of juice, that is rich in carbohydrates and sugars. That excrement decays quickly and attracts ants. During the warmth of day it disintegrates, so it has to be gathered in the cool of the morning..... And, the Bedouin, who live on the Sinai Peninsula, still gather it and bake it into bread.

Now, that manna could be some manner of bug mucus doesn't play as well as the Sunday school memories of pale Melba toast falling from the sky, or children waking early in the morning to scoop up the wafers that littered the desert floor. For some that more natural explanation takes away from the miracle ~

as if the manna has to come out of nowhere to qualify as miraculous,  
as if God has to drop wonder bread from the sky.

But, I'm not sure that it matters, for what if the point is simply that God provides? Or, to borrow Barbara Brown Taylor's question:

*What makes something bread from heaven?  
Is it the thing itself or the one who sends it?*

It is a remarkable story of liberation. Briefly told:

God's people were slaves to the empire. They'd been under Pharaoh's thumb for 430 years when God heard their suffering and raised up Moses to proclaim, "Let my people go!"

After a tug of war between Egyptian management and Israelite labor, after pummeling the powers that be with plagues, and after passing over in the night, God set his people free. And, they hurried off without even waiting to add yeast to the dough.

Once in the wilderness, God led them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. When their oppressor tracked them down on freedom's trail, God made a way where there was no way and the walls of water came-a-tumblin-down ~ washing away Pharaoh's army. And, the women danced and sang and made a holy racket:

*Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.  
Both horse and rider he has hurled into the sea.*

So, God led his people to sweet water, promised his protection, and camped them in Elim ~ where there were springs and palm trees and the shade of rest ~ but once they were back in the wilderness a crisis of food became a crisis of faith and the Israelites squawked,  
and belly ached,  
and forget what God had done,  
and complained that it was better to be full and oppressed rather than free and hungry.

And, without so much as a heavy sigh, or rolling his eyes, or spitting in anger ~ God provided manna. The same God who rained down hail on the Egyptians poured out the blessing of bread in the wilderness.

And so, dear friends, what can we make of it?

Now, maybe this is a stretch, so I ask for a little sermonic leeway...  
And, I don't think this is looking for an easy moralism....  
But, can we say....

There is a deep longing in all of us for a wisp or a whisper from God.  
There is a deep longing in all of us for a connection to the Divine. Whether we're enslaved to the empire or wandering in the wilderness there is a gnawing hunger for some manner of bread from heaven that is self authenticating and sustaining.

That is to say that we unmistakably know it to be of God and therefore there is life, hope, health, meaning....

But, we're impatient, restless, self absorbed, and even as we long for God we would have God meet us on our terms,  
and match our expectations,  
and meet our needs.

So, we can be quick to grumble and moan:  
Surely there must be something more than this!  
There must be something more passionate,  
something more purposeful,  
something more powerful,  
something more intimate, intense, and exciting,  
something more filling and fulfilling and....

Surely God wouldn't lead us out in liberation only to starve us in boredom.

And.... One response to this longing is the creation of all manner of gadgets to help us connect to God. There is an industry of products and programs that are designed to help fill that void: Promise Keepers, the Prayer of Jabez, the Purpose Driven Life, the emerging church movement, the Shack, etc...

They all exist because there is a longing for something more.  
They all emerge out the desire for something more satisfying.  
They all prosper because even those who have shed the shackles of slavery still long to be satiated.

Now, I am not suggesting that people aren't helped and healed by all sorts of means, and I am not suggesting that God can't use all sorts of stuff to feed his people....

But, what if this is it?  
What if what we're given is this?  
What if the bread of heaven that God gives to sustain is simply this?  
A flawed and fallen people ~  
with a story of liberation to remember and recite,  
and songs of liberation to sing,  
and symbols of God's provision to share.

What if God comes to us, in and through what is remarkably ordinary:  
Bread,  
wine,  
breath,  
friendship,  
water...

And the earth might not always move, and we might not always be on the mountain top feasting on the fatted calf, and we might not always feel full ~ but it is enough for the day.

For, if we look for or long for God only in that which is extraordinary we will miss the ordinary manna of every morning that is a gift of God's hand.

I don't know if that's just dialing down expectations. I don't think that precludes God from breaking-in in some mystical moment while walking through the woods. I don't think it will stop us from longing for something more and eventually joining the Israelites in building a golden calf ~

But, what if the bread of heaven ~ the way of God ~ is in the unexpected and the ordinary?

God born to a teen age mom in a backwater village,  
God nailed to a cross between common criminals,  
God broken as bread,  
Even a God who would provide bug mucus as manna.

So we gather to remember and recite and share in the symbols of God's provision ~ not hoarding or building bigger barns, but giving thanks for the bread of the day. May we be fed and find even in this table a taste of the presence God.

In 1984 I was more troubled and hungry than I am now. I was wandering in the Desert of Sin worrying about being an economic drain on my parents, and wondering if I would ever settle down and marry, so I wrote my dad. He had just come back from Russia after meeting after with Russian Christians and he responded with a letter ~ parts of which I know I've shared before.

But, toward the end of the letter, just before encouraging me to keep working at some gift for writing, and after an elegant few paragraphs about suffering and social justice, he wrote this:

*My sense of what it means to be a Christian seems to grow simpler all the time. What matters is God's way of overcoming evil: Baptism, the Lords, supper, congregational fellowship, Bible study, etc...all relate to that. Overcoming evil, meeting abundant sin with more abundant grace is what the cross of Christ is all about. As the basis of our confidence in God's love to us and as the pattern for our own lives in his will, it is what finally matters in the Christian life.*

Maybe these simple gifts are enough for the day.

Lord, give us this day our daily bread.

Amen.