

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, March 14, 2021 – Lent 4

Scripture: Exodus 16:1-18; Matthew 6:9-11; 6:25-34

Hymns: 89 – Bless all who trust in God; 196 – Throughout these Lenten Days (1,5);
I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus; 324 - Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Sermon Title: Manna-ing Our Daily Bread

Exodus 16:1-18 NIV

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?” Moses also said, “You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.” Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud. The LORD said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’” That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer (approx. 2 litres) for each person you have in your tent.’” The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

Matthew 6:9-11; Matthew 6:25-34 NIV

“This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

There they are, the whole Hebrew nation, gathered in groups of hundreds and thousands, six weeks into their journey from slavery in Egypt, far from any home they had known, too late to return and too far to turn back, a sea behind them and a desert before them. The children are crying, the elders are tiring, the donkeys are braying, and everyone but everyone is hungry. And before them stand Moses and Aaron, who had led them from the land of their slavery, who had shepherded them through the plagues and the waters, and suddenly it all looks like a good idea gone bad, or maybe even not so great an idea in the first place. With the unknown looming before them like an endless desert, suddenly the old life of slavery began to seem rosy in comparison, and all the resentment and fear and frustration and hunger is unleashed upon the brothers who stand in worried agitation.

The people say to them, “It would have been better if the LORD had killed us in the land of Egypt. There we had meat to eat and all the food we wanted. But you have brought us into this desert to starve us to death.” Or words to that effect. Plenty more too, I bet.

Moses asks his worthless brother Aaron what he suggests, and gets only a shuffling of feet and a clearing of the throat in response, so instead Moses seeks the voice of God. His prayer is from the heart, is to the point, is brief. “What now?” he asks God. The answer is as unexpected as every answer Moses ever got to any of his prayers. You would think he was used to it by now, but even this one must have taken him by surprise. God’s answer was that there would be a dew upon the ground the next morning, and every

morning after that but the Sabbath, and when the dew dried, it would leave behind some flaky goodness, doubtless packed with nine essential vitamins and minerals. “In the meantime, though,” said God, “tonight I’ll deliver poultry.”

So Moses stands before his people and gives them the good news, and before they can even pick themselves back up from the ground where they fell laughing, the air is filled with the beat of a thousand wings, as the quail come flying in thick as locusts, but many times bigger and, let’s face it, more appealing. It’s quail for dinner, and who knows, maybe this dewy stuff for breakfast.

Sure enough, early risers are greeted by what looks like hoarfrost covering the ground. It takes a while, but somebody finally does taste it, and pronounces it “not bad.” It looked like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin, a translucent white. Some said it tasted of honey, others said more like fresh sweet oil. But one thing everyone agreed upon; everyone, from the great to the small, looked at it, picked some up, sniffed it, tasted it, and said, “What is it?” And the Hebrew word for “What is it?” is Manna. And so it was called: Manna.

Everyone gathered whatever it was into pots and jars. They baked it, they fried it, they rolled it, they ate it raw. They had manna flakes for breakfast. They had manna burgers for lunch. They made it into manna-cotti. They baked it into bamanna bread. They brewed it into manna-tea. They had it for late suppers, called manna-nites. They manipulated it into little animal shapes and collected them into manna-geries. They made them into little people shapes called manna-kins. They did whatever they could mannage. People were crazy about the stuff; manna-mania ran rampant. Celebrations, known as manna-fests, were held. People sick from lack of food received manna-cures.

There were those who, contrary to instruction, attempted to hoard some to the next day, hoping perhaps to corner the manna market. The stuff didn’t keep, though, no matter what you did, but it didn’t matter. It seemed that everyone had managed to get just the right amount for themselves and their families. Every morning brought a new batch. All except the Sabbath; the people had been forewarned that the Sabbath was for resting, not collecting, and so those who didn’t bake Sabbath cakes the day before woke up hungry, with nothing to collect. Perhaps it was a refreshing change from the mannatony.

For years, as they wandered in search of their new home, God provided, day after day, the bread from heaven. And day after day, as they awoke to a new bounty, the people learned something important. They learned how to rely upon God. They learned how to trust. Together, they learned how to trust. To trust that God would supply their needs. Not too much; not too little; just enough. They learned how to trust God.

That’s a lesson we could do with, as well. Because we’ve forgotten how to trust

God. We trust our paycheque, our bank account, our RRSPs. We trust Sobeys and the Superstore and the ability to jump in the car and fill our shopping carts and load our trunks and fill our pantries, our cupboards, our freezers and fridge. We trust our savings and our pensions and, if worst comes to worst, we even trust our government and our social services to help get us by. But trust in God? For our daily bread? No. We are far, far better at worrying than we are at trusting. Like the people to whom and of whom Jesus spoke, we worry about what we shall eat, what we shall drink, what we shall wear. Our whole society is brilliantly summed up by Jesus in a single phrase: *“For the pagans run after all these things.”* There’s the Western world and its consumer-driven rat-race mentality in a nutshell: *“For the pagans run after all these things.”* Have you sometimes ever felt as though that is what you are spending your life doing? Running? After things?

Which is maybe what Jesus is getting at in the Lord’s Prayer. *“Give us this day our daily bread,”* he suggests we pray. Not, “give us this day enough to last us the rest of all time,” or, “give us this day a lot more than the other guy,” or “give us this day enough that we don’t know what to do with it all;” no, it is daily bread for which Jesus suggests we pray, confident and expectant that the next day we might also depend upon God’s provision and care. Just like in the desert. Just like with the manna.

It gets even more interesting when we look at the prayer in the ancient Greek language in which the New Testament was written. There we find that the original word in the prayer for “daily” is a Greek word, *epiousios*, which isn’t found anywhere else in ancient literature. This makes it tough to figure out what the word actually means. It could mean three quite different things altogether, and surprisingly enough it is more than likely that the ambiguity was intentional, and may in fact help us to sink our teeth into praying for “our daily bread.”

The first way to read this word would be as “substance, being or essence”, as in “give us this day that which is necessary for our existence.” This would be a humbling way to pray indeed, for few of us in our present situation would be content with the simple basics necessary for survival. If that is what the prayer says, than we are praying for a reduction in our standard of living, a stripping away of our vast collections of material comforts and securities. Not to say that this would be an entirely bad thing. Spiritually, it would likely do us a world of good, advice similar to that which Jesus offered the rich man when he enquired about heaven. *“Give it all away,”* said Jesus, the one thing the fellow just could not do. *“Wherever your treasure lies, there will you find your heart,”* said Jesus, calling after him as the man rode away.

Praying with this in mind would be praying that God would meet our needs, not our wants, or even what we think we need, but what God sees our need actually to be. You know, “Give us what we need, what we actually need, each and every day, O God,” is not a bad prayer. So much of our lives are spent in dissatisfaction, not because our needs are

not being met, but because our wants – ever increasing and ever insatiable - are going unfulfilled. Could this prayer – sincerely prayed, every day – be the antidote to our eternal cravings, our eternal dissatisfaction? “Give us what we need, what we actually need, each and every day, O God.” It is like the hymn, “Great is thy Faithfulness”: “all I have needed – needed, it says – not wanted, needed - all I have needed thy hand has provided.”

The second possible meaning for *epiousios* - daily - is “present”, as in “keep on giving us each day the bread we need for the present – what we need for right now.” To pray this way would be to acknowledge daily - over and over again - the benevolence of God in meeting our needs. That each day our existence, our sustenance, every bit of breath we take and every bit of food we eat, is dependent upon God. That what is keeping us going – right now, this very moment – is entirely dependent upon God. That there is not a moment of our lives when we don’t need God; that God is not something or someone we keep in a box for emergencies only. We need God now. For this very present moment. For today’s bread, for this moment’s breath, for strength and hope and courage and peace *right now* – we need God.

To pray this way is to go a long way towards acknowledging who God is and who we are, and how we should guard against taking so much for granted. We tend to realise this only in a time of crisis; so often have I prayed with people saying, “God, we need your help, your presence, your strength, your blessing, right now.” Well, God is with you – right now. God’s help, presence, strength and blessing is with you – right now. When we pray, “keep on giving us each day the bread we need for this present moment,” we are reminding ourselves of this very fact. God isn’t just the God of yesterday or tomorrow. God isn’t just the God of emergencies. God is the God of every moment of our daily lives - God is the God of right now. “Great is thy faithfulness” – right now.

The third way of reading *epiousios* is as “coming”, or “future”. The prayer would then mean, “Give us this day the bread we need for the future.” Or, “give us this day tomorrow’s bread.” This is actually close to the way the prayer appears in Luke’s Greek, rather than the Matthew version with which we are familiar. Bibles translate Luke’s version as “Give us day by day our daily bread,” “Give us the food we need for each day,” even, “Give us the food we need for tomorrow.”

And this is the way of praying to which we are perhaps most sympathetic. We want security. We do not want to know from where our **next** meal is coming, but from where **tomorrow’s** is coming, and next **week**, and next **month**, and next **year’s**. “Give us this day the assurance that our future needs will be met.” Now that is a prayer that can come from our hearts, for this is the way in which we live and move. Let me explain with a story:

There were missionaries working with children orphaned by military atrocities in Central America. These children had lost everything – parents, homes, communities – often right before their eyes. Not surprisingly, the children had a terrible time sleeping, even within the secure environment of the orphanages providing the most loving of care. Finally, the missionaries hit upon a solution: Sleeping with bread. Every night, as the children went to bed, and prayed the Lord’s Prayer, they would be tucked in, and would be given a small loaf of bread – like a bun – with which to sleep. They closed their eyes knowing that no matter what the night brought, they would awaken with bread in their hand, and with that bread, the promise of making it through another day. “Give us this day what we’ll need to make it through tomorrow. Help us to know, Father, that the future is in your hands.” Like the hymn, “Great is thy Faithfulness”: *“Morning by morning new mercies I see.”*

We started with Manna, and we’ll end with it too. We read, (Exodus 16:35 NIV) *“The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.”* Forty years, it took, until they learned to trust in God. How long will it take us? I’ve been walking this earth for one-and-a-half-times-forty years, and I don’t think I’m there quite yet. But as I pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” I’ll continue to try to put my faith in God.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer tonight. Pray it tomorrow morning. But when you’ve reached the *“Give us this day our daily bread,”* part, stop. Stop and think. Think about needs as opposed to wants. Think about God being present with you right now. And think about how God has your future safe in hand. And then pray it tomorrow again.

One last thing before you go: Did you notice again what the prayer actually said? Did you notice how it said, “Give US this day OUR daily bread?” Wouldn’t it be wonderful to not only pray this, conscious of our own needs, but of the needs of US and OUR too? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to place bread in the hand of a hungry soul, to be part of God’s answer to the prayer of another? Through your generosity to our Missions program, which supports the local Upper Room Soup Kitchen and Food Bank, and through your wonderful support of the Canadian FoodGrains Bank, you are doing more than praying “Give me this day my daily bread;” you are praying – and doing – the words of Jesus: “Give US this day OUR daily bread.” Together with God, you are answering prayer. And if there is a better way to live life than by answering the prayer of a hungry soul, well, let me know.

“Give us this day that which we require for existence; Keep on giving us each day that which we need for the present; Give us this day the assurance that our future needs will be met.” “Us. Our.” Amen.