

September 24, 2017
Year A, Creation 3
Exodus 16:2-15
“BBQ Quail Anyone?”
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Exodus 16:2-15 (NRSV)

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.”

Then 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. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” And 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. 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.

Most of us would know, that the polite response when served something to eat, is most certainly **not** ‘what is it?’

Even when the offered food is un-identifiable – Emily Post might suggest saying ‘that looks interesting!’ or perhaps ‘this must be a new recipe!’

Only unmannered children would point at unrecognizable food and rudely demand: ‘what’s that?’

But when the hungry Israelites discover some strange yet edible flaky substance covering the ground of their camp – they spontaneously exclaim those very words: ‘What is it?’ - in their native Hebrew ‘*Man-hu?*’ which subsequently gives the mystery food that will feed them for the next forty years its familiar biblical name: manna.

For the wandering and starving Israelites, who didn’t even have time to let their bread rise, before grabbing it and rushing out the door to flee Egypt – and who are now forced to wrestle up whatever grub to eat they can find in the barren desert, good manners are obviously not a priority.

And who can blame them?

Let's briefly review their troubled history from the books of Genesis and Exodus that we've been reading throughout this summer:

Remember Joseph? (that Jewish guy with the nice coat?) who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his not-so-nice brothers?

And then remember how Joseph eventually helps the Egyptian Pharaoh out by predicting a famine – and encouraging him to stockpile staple provisions?

And then when the famine spreads back to his old homeland, Joseph's family arrives in Egypt in search of food?

....Only to discover that Joseph has survived their abuse and is now a bigwig in the Pharaoh's court?

Then remember how after the happy reunion, many years pass, until Joseph and all his brothers have died – and the Hebrew people have all become enslaved to the nasty Pharaoh,until along comes baby Moses (a Hebrew male baby who can thank a couple of clever midwives for his survival!)

And then, how Moses grows up and becomes the one summoned by God (in the form of a burning bush) to lead the enslaved Israelites to freedom –

....because **God has heard their complaints about being oppressed and God responds**by coaxing Moses to help them escape on dry ground through the waters of the Red Sea? An escape memorialized in a joyful song of praise by his sister Miriam.

That, in a nutshell, is what you've missed if you've been away at all this summer....which brings us as far as last week's reading.

And today, those newly liberated, and recently jubilant former slaves, who, after generations of oppression have at long last found their freedom – but are wishing they were back in Egypt **because at least there they had something to eat!**

At least there, they protest, we mighta died of hard labour, but we wouldn'ta died of hunger!

Are they ungrateful? Or forgetful perhaps – about how bad things really were back in Egypt? But how desperately hungry they must be, to even consider opting for full bellies coupled with slavery, over their present situation, of famished freedom!

It's like a question in the family board game 'would you rather'; where players pull cards and must answer silly questions such as 'would you rather....be chased by a bear in an open field or wrestle with an alligator in a swamp?'

'Would you rather have 3 square meals a day and be forced to do manual labour....or have total freedom but always be scavenging for your next meal?'

Neither is a preferred option.

And yet it's easy to condemn the Israelites for their lack of gratitude. To paint them as whiners and complainers who must certainly must frustrate their leader Moses to no end, as he tries to cope with herding them along to the Promised Land – looking for rest stops along the way – searching out water and food – listening to their incessant cries of 'I'm hungry' 'I'm thirsty' and 'are we there yet?'

And then when heavenly food finally does arrive – 'eww - what's that?!'

But what if we were to read this story from a different perspective, and instead of focusing on the actions and attitudes of the Israelites, we focus on the actions and attitudes of God.

And we pay attention to what God actually does in this story.

To begin with, God listens;

God hears their complaints in the wilderness, just as God heard their complaints in Egypt.

And upon hearing them, God responds.

God understands their needs – and responds by providing the necessities of life. Water.

Food. Freedom.

Not in excessive amounts - but enough to satisfy their daily needs.

But God also provides something else to this emerging community – which is, the structure of routine.

God insists on a pattern of ‘gather and rest, gather and rest’ – a pattern that echoes God’s own creation routine of having days of labour followed by a Sabbath break.

Now remember, this story today precedes the ten commandments – Moses hasn’t yet climbed the mountain to receive those stone tablets, but (spoiler alert!) we’ll be hearing about that a few weeks from now -

....but in today’s passage, we can already notice in these simple instructions from God to this newly freed assembly in the desert, hints of what type of people God would like them to be. What sort of community, God would like them to form.

This is really somewhat of a nativity story – the birth of a people – the creation of a new type of relationship – the imposition of guidance and order, on lives that were previously lived in anxious chaos.

And we begin to see an image of what this new society might look; a society under the leadership and support of a loving God, in contrast to one under the oppressive thumb of an Egyptian tyrant.

Back in Egypt, under Pharaoh’s rule – the economy was ruled by the rich and powerful.

There was competition for resources, which led to a mentality of aggressive accumulation and hoarding (remember the stockpiles of food during the famine?)

Hard labour was not just strictly, but brutally enforced – grinding round-the-clock work shifts with no weekends off and no overtime.

Oh, and definitely no complaining. (well, you could complain all you want but nobody really listened!)

How very different from this brand new society being established in the desert under God’s rule;

Where the previously pervasive and oppressive attitude of ‘every man for himself’ suddenly becomes ‘one for all, and all for one!’

Where disparity, is suddenly replaced by equality;

...And the need to hoard and accumulate, is replaced by instructions to ‘gather only what you need’;

Trust – and it will be provided.

And – importantly – the people are commanded, to take a Sabbath break. Rest their weary bones for one day a week – and spend their time re-connecting, with one another, and with this mighty and benevolent God who has freed them.

Getting to know each other. Beginning to understand each other. Listening to one another, and building trust.

These past few Sundays, even though we've been jumping around between the Gospel, the epistles and the Hebrew testament – we keep seeming to encounter the same old story;

Namely; What type of community, does God call us to be?

Through this week's lens of Exodus – we can ask ourselves specifically – do we want to be a community based on the rules and values of Pharaoh? Or of God?

Based on the hoarding of wealth and resources?
Or on the principle of 'enough for everyone'?

Where complaints of the needy fall on deaf ears?
Or are heard and responded to?

Do we want to be a community where our rhythms and daily practices leave people feeling overwhelmed and exhausted? Or where equal opportunity for rest and rejuvenation, is available to all of its members?

Today's story from Exodus, offers a glimpse into the type of community into which God desires to shape us;

One that is counter-cultural to the imperial court and the powerful elite – one that stands in stark opposition to any form of oppression or enslavement;

One where people work together to ensure each member is not only fed – but well-rested. A community that believes 'enough' is a feast – sharing all of its resources, with the trust that its needs will be met again tomorrow.

As a church, as a society, may God's spirit lead us,
to continue to grow into becoming such a community.

And may our structures, our rules, and our goals – always be in alignment with those of God.
Thanks be to God,
Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Holy and Generous God...you have listened to the complaints of your people across the generations...just as surely as you have continued to provide for our needs.

Help us to turn our focus from our inward way....to become more aware of the needs of others.

Open our eyes and our hearts to the plight of those around us...that we may both see and share their suffering....and do what we can to help.

Help us to be grateful for all that we have....without always thinking we deserve more.

Help us to understand and participate in your kingdom economy – based not on what people think they deserve, but on what they need.

...Focused on humans and creation, rather than power and profit.

...Where rewards come not in dollars and cents, but in healing and wholeness.

Today we pray for all workers; that they may have jobs that offer dignity and fulfillment, along with the means of adequately supporting their families.

We pray for those who work in the home and volunteer; that their efforts may be recognized as important contributions to the wellness of our families and the functioning of our community;

We pray for those whose justifiable complaints are raised in peaceful protests....that their voices will be heard by those with decision-making power, and that their energy and enthusiasm will ripple outward inspiring us and others to explore ways of becoming part of the solution rather than the problem.

We pray for those affected by climate change....or touched by natural disasters caused by extreme weather...for humans and God's other creatures who lose their homes to hurricanes, floods and wildfires....for those who lose their livelihoods and sources of food....

We pray for those who are ill or suffering...those recovering from or awaiting surgery....those anxiously awaiting test results...

And we silently hold in prayer these names and situations...

Hear us O Generous God....and help us to see the bigger picture...

Make us aware of the world's needs...rather than our own.

Help us to direct our complaining toward the things that affect future generations, rather than our immediate lifestyle....

...And to the betterment of the whole creation....

And continue to mold and shape us into the caring and compassionate community that you created us to be...

...we pray in words used by your faithful community through the ages...our father.