

Sermon by Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 22, 2002

**“Bread in the Wilderness”**  
**Exodus 16:2-15**

Last Sunday night, I was sitting at the dinner table with Langley and James  
and I did one of those typical parent things that I used to laugh about  
and thought I would never do...in the days before I had kids.  
I pulled out the old guilt line: “Don’t you know there are starving children in Africa...”

Mary Ellen had eaten early to get to the church for Youth Connection  
so it was just the kids and Dad.

I had warmed up leftovers from the night before,  
and they tasted like – well – leftovers.

James started his typical 2 year old routine  
of taking each piece of food off the plate and putting it on his place mat.

Then Langley joined in the revolt and announced in her 5 year old whine  
“Daddy, this is the same thing we ate last night!

    We don’t like eating the same food for two nights!”

After about 15 minutes of this, I finally gave in and said it:

“Langley, did you know there are children in Africa  
who haven’t had anything to eat for weeks!

    They would love to eat what you have on your plate –  
    even if they had to eat it every night for a whole year!

Langley looked rather astonished, and she quietly reflected on my shocking statement  
for a full 4 seconds,

    at which point the injustice of leftovers overcame her once more  
    and the revolt continued.

\* \* \* \* \*

This routine was still fresh on my mind when I opened the book of Exodus  
and read once again about Moses and Aaron out in the wilderness  
with the whole congregation of the Israelites  
complaining against 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.*

It seems these people would rather be slaves, abused by their taskmasters,  
with the lives of their children in jeopardy at the whim of Pharaoh –  
but with plenty of meat to eat –  
    than to be free  
    yet uncertain of when and where their next meal would be coming.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann perceives in this text a story about  
“the crisis of faith that occurs between bondage and well-being.”<sup>i</sup>

It is likely that reason the Israelites were on the move again,  
leaving the springs and palm trees of Elim and venturing out into the wilderness  
was because the food and water dried up.

So the crisis of the wilderness is one of physical survival:  
the people are deeply anxious about having enough to eat and drink.<sup>ii</sup>

Still, it is hard to imagine the recently freed slaves,  
who have just escaped by walking through the Red Sea on dry ground,  
saved from the pursuing Egyptian army at the last possible moment,  
who were singing praise to God only a few verses before,  
now thinking they would be better off back in Egypt;  
unless...

their anxiety about their material well-being  
has begun to distort their memory of what the life of bondage was like.

\* \* \* \* \*

As we discussed this passage of scripture at the Session meeting this past week,  
several of the elders noted how familiar this story sounds;  
things haven't changed much –  
we are still prone to complain at the first sign of adversity;  
still prone to believe that the grass is greener on the other side;  
and perhaps we still have a tendency to blame the easiest, nearest target  
instead of coming to terms with our present reality  
as the place where God has led us,  
and the place where God wants bless us.

In modern times, just as in this ancient narrative,  
we find ourselves in a crisis of faith between bondage and well-being.  
We want to escape the powers that press in upon us and burden our lives  
but we can't bring ourselves to trust God enough to plunge into the wilderness  
that is the only way to freedom.

Let's try to bring this into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
We live in a culture and participate in an economy in which  
prosperity is rooted in the unending creation of new consumer needs.  
For our country to keep on growing economically,  
the Market has to keep convincing us that we do not have enough stuff,  
or that with a little more work and a little more money we could have better stuff  
a better standard of living.  
And if we just had this better stuff, this better standard  
we would be happier and more content.

Only, the problem is that as soon as we get more stuff, or better stuff,  
and then more of the better stuff,  
we notice that the Joneses have newer and better stuff than we do,  
so that our stuff doesn't make us quite as happy as we thought it would.  
The Joneses, however, don't feel any happier or more contented than we do,  
because they've been watching the Smiths,  
who are a few steps ahead of them.  
and the Smiths have been watching the Doe's  
and they've all been watching TV – lots of it.

And so the cycle of creating needs, and work-and-spend, work-and-spend continues  
until we have a culture of people who are stressed and anxious about  
just making ends meet, meeting our “basic needs”,  
basic needs which to more than 2/3 of the world's people  
are considered unimaginable luxury.

The result of this endless creation of discontent,  
according to Juliet Schor, Harvard Professor of Economics,  
is that “We live in what may be the most consumer-oriented society in history.  
Americans spend three to four times as many hours a year shopping  
as their counterparts in Western European countries.”  
Shop 'til you drop has become a national obsession.  
“Going to the mall is a common Friday or Saturday night's entertainment,  
not only for teens who seem to live in them, but also for adults  
And “shopping is the most popular weekday evening  
'out-of-home entertainment'.  
And malls are everywhere.  
Four billion square feet of our nation's total land area  
has been converted into shopping centers,  
or about 16 square feet for every American man, woman, and child.”<sup>iii</sup>

That's not to mention the nearly infinite number of products available  
over the internet, cable channels, and mail-order.  
All of these products and their producers and marketers are working together  
to create more needs (really, more desires) in our lives,  
more dissatisfaction with what we have or how we look  
or what we wear or what we eat or what we drink.  
And in case I'm worried I can't have all that I want right now, today,  
on Wednesday this past week I receive four pre-approve credit card applications  
in the mail – Citibank, People's Bank, Chase Manhattan, and MBNA.  
It's no wonder we have seen the emergence of 12-step recovery groups called  
Debtors Anonymous and Shop-a-holics Limited.

The full impact of our dilemma may not be realized until a person or a family  
decides to try to resist the cycle of discontented working-and-spending.  
What if a family decided not to be ruled by this endless dissatisfaction  
and instead chose to drop down to a lower level of income,  
reducing hours or having one spouse at home,

in order to reduce the stress of overwork and achieve more sanity.  
In most cases, for a family to drop down would mean  
having a harder time fitting in socially:  
lunches and dinners out become too expensive,  
providing child care or babysitting is too much,  
at \$8 a pop, going to the movies is out of the question,  
not to mention sporting events, Heinz Hall, or the Benedum;  
children will not have the latest toys and clothes  
or be able to participate in all the extra-curricular activities that cost money.  
they'll drop off the birthday party circuit because they can't afford to bring gifts  
or to throw a suitable party themselves,

Juliet Schor observes that

“unless [this family who drops down]  
has a community of others in similar circumstances,  
dropping down will include an element of dropping out.  
Many Americans, especially those with children,  
are not willing to risk such a fate.”<sup>v</sup>

I hope it's somewhat clear where I'm going with all this analysis of American culture.  
As I read this Exodus text,

I find myself – and I suspect most Americans find themselves –  
better able to identify with the Israelites  
as they are sitting by the fleshpots in Egypt with plenty to eat  
but ruled by a merciless taskmaster (the Market? profit?),  
living in bondage to discontent with little hope of escape.

And you know as well as I do that this bondage is just as powerful  
over those who have big, fancy investment accounts  
as for those who are living hand-to-mouth, paycheck-to-paycheck.

\* \* \* \* \*

What I think this story about the Manna does for us

is to re-ignite our imagination to envision another possibility for our lives;  
a way of life that is not rich in appearance,  
but deeply nourishing to our spirits, strengthening to our souls.

*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...*

*...there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance...*

*“What is it,” the people asked. For they did not know what it was.*

*Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”*

In the middle of the wilderness. In the place of anxiety. In the risky venture of Exodus,  
the abundant fleshpots of Egypt left behind,

God provides bread!

Food was all around them. Free for the taking.

Interesting, they did not recognize it.

They were living in the crisis of faith between bondage and well-being  
and their vision was distorted. They didn't know what would nourish them.

But the Lord heard their complaining;

We can be glad the Lord did not give them near what they asked for:

They asked for abundance, with bondage.

Instead, God gave them just enough, with freedom.

Now I have little doubt that after 40 years of eating manna in the wilderness  
there was probably a good bit more complaining –

particularly from the 5 year olds

who don't like leftovers.

But they were blessed with all that they needed from the gracious hand of God.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesus also tells a few stories that reveal our crisis of faith  
on this journey from bondage to well-being.

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,  
what you will eat or what you will drink,  
or about your body, what you will wear...*

*Look at the birds of the air...your heavenly Father feeds them*

*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin...*

*...indeed your heavenly Father know that you need all these things...*

And in today's reading,

some laborers start work early in the morning.

But for all their hard work, they are unable to enjoy the fruit of their labor.

In their anxious comparing, they find at the end of the day  
that the owner of the vineyard gives the same wage to all  
regardless of the length of their work.

The owner has graciously provided so that no one is left in need,  
but his generosity doesn't add up in the scales of the marketplace.

Rather than gratefully receiving their wage after a good days work  
the laborers become trapped in the bondage of their discontent.

Someone else got a better deal, robbing them of their full happiness.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last, Jesus says.

The slave will go free, and the Egyptian chariot-driver will wind up dead on the shore.

The fleshpots of the Empire turn out to be of little nutritional value

compared to the nourishment of God's Bread in the Wilderness.

Such is the Kingdom of God.

So my question in closing is this:

How can this church , this congregation, be a community of support  
where we find the courage to resist the anxious bondage of our abundance  
and choose instead to live and be truly alive in glad dependence  
on the faithfulness of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol I, p. 812.

<sup>ii</sup> Brueggemann, p. 812.

<sup>iii</sup> Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, p. 107.

<sup>iv</sup> Schor, p. 134-135.