

Daily Bread

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Exodus 16 (selected verses) (New International Version) ² In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³ 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." ...
¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, ¹² "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.'"
¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. [The Hebrew for "What is it?" is "*Man hu?*"]
Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer [approx. three pounds] for each person you have in your tent.'" ¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.... and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.... ³¹ The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.
- Matthew 6:9-13 New Revised Standard Version ⁹ "Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

As the story goes,

Two men were [chatting over dinner] when the topic of conversation got around to religion. One turned to his friend and said, "I bet you don't even know the Lord's Prayer."

"Wait a minute," the friend protested, "I do too know the Lord's Prayer!"

So the man pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and said, "I bet you can't say it right now."

The friend confidently replied, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...."

At that the man interrupted him, sliding the bill in front of his friend. "Here's your money," he said, "I didn't think you knew it."¹

¹ Modified from <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/80713/ignorance-by-gordon-curley?ref=TextIllustrationSerps> accessed 9/13/2020

As well as we may know the Lord's Prayer, it's been suggested that we may know it so well that we don't realize how much we *don't* know about it. In a book about the Lord's Prayer entitled The Greatest Prayer, a New Testament scholar named John Dominic Crossan wrote

The Lord's Prayer is Christianity's greatest prayer. It is also Christianity's strangest prayer. It is prayed by all Christians, but it never mentions Christ. It is prayed in all churches, but it never mentions church. It is prayed on all Sundays, but it never mentions Sunday. It is called the "Lord's Prayer," but it never mentions "Lord...."

It is prayed by Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic Christians, but it never mentions congregation, priest, bishop or pope. It is prayed by Christians who split from one another over this or that doctrine, but it never mentions a single one of those doctrines....

It is prayed by Christians who emphasize what it never mentions and also by Christians who ignore what it does [mention]."²

Jesus probably saw lots of examples of people who tried to impress God with long prayers filled with fancy language. He also saw lots of people who didn't bother to acknowledge God's activity in the world. So for his disciples and the crowds who came to him for guidance, Jesus offered this model prayer.

In it one thing Jesus specifically asks us to raise to God is the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." Bread, of course, is a metaphor for any food we eat to survive. That petition of the prayer specifically asks "give us *this* day...." The implication is that each and every day we are to be mindful of God's presence in our lives, mindful that the things we need every day are provided by God.

Where did Jesus get that vision of God as the day-in and day-out provider? He knew the scriptures. He knew the history of the Jewish people, including the episode we heard today from the Israelites' journey from slavery to a Promised Land through the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula.

Based on descriptions in the Bible, scholars think they have a rough idea of the route that Moses and Aaron took to lead the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. At this point in their journey they had been traveling for perhaps a month and a half. They'd just had a break at an oasis called Elim with "springs of water and palm trees in abundance."³ Now they'd been back on the roadless road through the wilderness, and their worries about hunger and thirst caused them to grumble about their leaders. The people accused Moses and Aaron of a bait-and-switch of sorts: they muttered, "You two lured us out of Egypt only to cause us to meet our deaths in the Wilderness!"

As we heard in Exodus Chapter 16, God instructed Moses to assure the people that, as usual, God will provide for them. Way out there in the rocky, dusty wilderness the Israelites were told, "At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be

² John Dominic Crossan, The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer, New York: HarperCollins, 2010, Prologue, p.1 as cited at <https://chuckwarnockblog.wordpress.com/2011/02/26/sermon-when-you-pray-the-lords-prayer/> accessed 9/13/2020

³ Terence E. Fretheim, Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Exodus. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991, 181

filled with bread.”⁴ That very evening the ground became covered with quail, and the next morning, as the dew evaporated, a thin, flaky bread materialized as if out of nowhere. We’re not told what they said when they saw the quail, but when the Israelites came across the unfamiliar flaky bread-like substance, they said in Hebrew “*Mah nu?*” which means “What is it?” And that’s what they ended up calling the stuff: “*mah nu*” or “manna” from heaven.

It might interest you to learn that there are scientific explanations for what must have seemed like a miracle at the time.

A type of plant lice punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives who bake it into a kind of bread (and [still] call it manna). The food decays quickly and attracts ants. Regarding the quails, migratory birds flying in from Africa or blown in from the Mediterranean are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.⁵

The fact that these phenomena have a rational explanation accentuates the power of the story; it doesn’t detract from it. In this instance, what is natural is seen as a gift from God.

And isn’t that the point of the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, too: that our ability to meet our own and our family’s daily needs is due to God’s generous provision. After all, we know that we have a tendency to take things for granted and not to be mindful of what’s going on around us. As a result it’s all too likely that time and time again we’ll forget “to see in the very ordinariness of things that God is the one who bestows blessings again and again.”⁶

Is this pandemic like a wilderness experience for us? We try to envision that Promised Land – a time and place where vaccines have vanquished mask mandates and social distancing and restrictions of activities. But we don’t know how long it will be until we’re there. We don’t know if we’ll encounter other unforeseen challenges along the way – a worse-than-normal flu season? a winter of particularly harsh weather?

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we, too, long for deliverance from these extraordinary times. We long for days that are simpler, calmer, more pleasant and manageable. We would love for a miraculous deliverance from the threats to physical and mental health, from the challenges of educating our children, deliverance from the difficulties caused by isolation and quarantine. We would love a miraculous deliverance from the hardships of working remotely and dealing with others who are working remotely. O how we wish and hope and pray to be spared the current, constant struggles of trying to figure out if there’s any new way to do what we used to be able to do.

And yet there are miracles in our day. The miracle is so often found in what we dismiss as ordinary but what is anything but ordinary.

⁴ Exodus 16:12b New International Version

⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Exodus. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991, 182

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Exodus. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991, 182

And so we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We pray for awareness and appreciation for the daily blessings that fill our lives, blessings that we’ve come to consider as ordinary. “Give us this day our daily bread.” We pray that we will learn from Jesus how to see God in all parts of our lives: not just those mountaintop moments of elation and achievement, not just in those times of desperation when we cry out from the deep pit of adversity or tragedy. We pray to see God in the ordinary stuff of overcast days and reheated leftovers and making the bed and preparing another monthly report.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” As the Israelites could give thanks for God’s gift of bread in the morning and meat at night, we pray that we will remember to look for God’s hand constantly at work in our lives – giving us this day our “daily bread.”

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