

Bread in a Jar
Exodus 16

Julia M. O'Brien
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(Set Bread in a jar on the pulpit)

And Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD, to be kept throughout your generations."

Bread in a jar. That was Israel's keepsake from the wilderness. What the people would hold onto throughout the generations in order to remember to tell and retell this story about what happened between them and God on the way to the promised land.

It would be hard for any reader of the Old Testament to miss just how often Israel did remember the wilderness, just how important the wilderness was to Israel's self-understanding. While it might have been in the land of promise that Abraham was called and the nation eventually built, it was in the wilderness that Israel as a whole forged its relationship with God.

The wilderness was the place of Sinai, where the people agreed to an exclusive relationship with God. Israel and God entered a covenant, made promises to each other. God promised "you will be my people and I will be your God." And the people promised to let their entire lives be governed by what pleases God. Christians often call what was given at Sinai "Law." I see it instead as the obligations that come with relationship, the willing surrendering of one's theoretical freedom into order to be with another.

But our story today tells us that even before the covenant at Sinai was made, before the thunder and lightning and the laying out of the obligations, the wilderness first was a place in which God provided food.

To hungry people, God provided quail and bread—a new kind of bread left by the dew, sweet and flaky. This bread was so new that it needed a new name, manna, which means “what?” And it needed instructions. For the first time in their lives, the Israelites did not have to labor for what they ate. In an era in which grain production probably took at least 2 hrs every day, all the people had to do to taste this bread was to reach out and pick it up.

The bread didn’t even need to be stored. In fact, trying to save it up was counterproductive: as the text says, “some gathered more, some less, but when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.” The only exception to the daily expiration date of the manna was for the Sabbath. What the people gathered on Friday was enough to sustain them on Saturday, enough food for a day of rest.

This was bread that not only kept people surviving. It kept them fully alive. It would have been enough had God simply given a small daily ration of bland but nourishing food. But God gave food that was free, and abundant, and sweet. It gave them the strength not only to keep walking but also to sit still and be replenished. Clearly, the graciousness of God was exhibited long before the making of the covenant at Sinai.

Bread in a jar. To remember this story is to remember God’s grace.

But that’s not all there is to this story. Remembering manna also means remembering the other truth of the wilderness: that the wilderness was also a place of murmuring, complaint, disappointment. The people cry out, "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." The Israelites were so miserable that they were willing to return to slavery, to have something firm to hold onto, even if that something was bondage.

Some interpreters see these murmuring Israelites as whiny, ungrateful, petulant children. Perhaps there was some of that. But I also see them as hurting people who were hungry and scared,

confused that the God who they believed liberated them for the purpose of entering a new relationship at Sinai had now abandoned them to their misery.

If it is this story that Israel was to remember whenever it looked at the bread in a jar, then the remembering was not to be a naïve nostalgia. Israel throughout the generations was to tell the whole story of the wilderness: both God's provision and the times of disappointment.

II

For those of you who are graduating, it's probably easy to hear the story of the Israelites' wilderness sojourn as an allegory for your own experience of seminary. My guess is that your story for the past 3 (or 4 or 5) years might sound much like this one.

- Perhaps having to come to seminary at all felt like a wilderness sojourn in itself, yet another delay in your quest to enter the Promised Land of ministry. (Maybe you should rejoice that it didn't take you 40 years!) Why couldn't they, why couldn't you, go straight from your liberation to the land of milk and honey?

- Perhaps the Israelites' feelings of disappointment and abandonment by God sound strangely like that first year of seminary, when the rosy image of answering your call was confronted with the reality of not only of classes and papers, but also the challenge of the very theological understandings that may have brought you here in the first place.

- My guess is that most of you have shared with the Israelites the desire to quit, to go back to the familiarity of the jobs and the life that you left. Even if your old life felt like bondage, sometimes I'm sure you felt that it still was better than this. At least back there, you knew who you were and what it was that you were supposed to do.

- Oh, and let's not forget the murmuring. The complaints. Both your own and that of your classmates.

- Just like Israel, you have also come to understand, haven't you, that experiences of adversity and provision can bring different people together into a community. As a class, you know that even when people are complaining together, they are together. And when you are fed together, well, that is just bliss.
- Of course, you too have experienced God's provision. God has provided food—physical and metaphorical--when you were ravenous. Often it was nourishment that you did not immediately recognize, a new kind of sustenance that was strangely sweet and surprisingly abundant. It was food that you couldn't manufacture yourself or hoard for the future or control in any way--only accept it thankfully as a gracious gift.
- And perhaps you heard in this story a note of foreboding for the future: manna, given abundantly in the wilderness, would cease when the people reached the Promised Land. There they would need to plow and sow and reap and grind grain in order to be sustained. They would need to plan ahead to have enough to meet their needs for Sabbath. As you face leaving this familiar place, perhaps you also feel the anxiety of knowing that, very soon, your sustenance will need to come from different sources, ones that you have not yet seen.

Seminarians, you have lived this story.

But, in another way, so have those of you who have been the companions of seminary students—their partners, their families, their friends, their mentors. This is your story, too.

- You likely have experienced your own wilderness, of feeling abandoned and hungry for sustenance, taken away from your home but finding little to feed you.
- You have not only had to listen to their complaining but have likely done some yourself.
- I hope, that you also have experienced for yourself moments of grace in which you have miraculously been fed with free, sweet, bread. Nourishment that you did not know to expect.
- And I'm sure that you, like the Israelites, wonder what will sustain you in the land to which you are going next.

Companions have lived this story, too.

For those of us faculty and staff, this is an especially interesting allegory: because in many ways for us the wilderness of seminary is not a temporary stop but the boundary-land on which we perpetually live, forever hearing and voicing complaints and yet constantly surprised by how God finds ways to nourish those who sojourn with us and those of us who stay.

III

Those allegories ring true in many ways. This story is our story. We have lived it. But it is not just the story of the past that we have spent together. This story is also our proclamation, what we have to offer the church and the world. Its orientation toward the future is built right in: this story is not only to be read and remembered by those living long after the wilderness generation, but also, as you know from your biblical studies, it was actually those generations who wrote this story. Those who committed these stories to writing were looking back to the past as a way to know and claim who they were, and who they were and would be with God.

This story can give hope to all people who find themselves in situations of dislocation and displacement, because it claims that even in the wilderness God's people can be fed. We have seen that truth not only here on campus but, in powerful ways, in our home churches and field ed sites. In the churches and homes that we visited on our crosscultural experiences, we were ministered to by Christians who trusted enough in God's provision to share with us from their poverty. We have seen God provide.

Bread in a jar.

Bread broken and cup shared as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

These are ancient stories that testify to the possibilities of the future. Throughout all generations, God feeds in strange, unexpected ways.

IV

But as we remember God's provision, to be true to the story of Israel in the wilderness, true to the message of the gospel, and true to our own experience, today we must testify to the murmurings as well. Our own journey has come with pain and disappointment, and the world to whom we proclaim, "God provides" has every right to complain about its hunger and our failure to provide for one another. No, proclaiming that God provides does not require us to deny the legitimate and even the not-so-legitimate complaints of ourselves and of others.

Bread in a jar. It is a reminder of the whole story of Israel in the wilderness-- the provision and the grumbling. It is an affirmation that God not only feeds God's people but also hears their cries and their complaints.

Today is a day to celebrate in an honest way about our sojourn here.

And it is a day to recommit ourselves to share that double-sided truth—the promise of provision and the reality of complaint--with a hurting world.