

## LENT IN PLAIN SIGHT: DAILY BREAD

Exodus 16:2-15

March 6, 2022

Two years and many lifetimes ago, the first Sunday in the season of Lent fell on the first day in the month of March. It was, in many ways, an ordinary Sunday at Second Presbyterian Church. We had a new member class; we welcomed new members that morning. In worship, an ensemble of our Second Winds played. Elder Rhonda Kittle and youth deacon Thomas Drook read scripture that day. We passed offering plates down each of the pews. We shook hands. We drank coffee. We ate donuts. And not one of us wore a mask. Our theme that year—our Lent 2020 theme launched that day—was *A Clearing Season*. In presenting the theme to the staff earlier that week, I summarized the first Sunday this way: “In the first week of Lent, we begin to look at the aspects of our lives that feel chaotic or out of control...thoughts, actions, or feelings that hinder our communication with God and our sense of God’s presence.” My, oh my, we were all so young. We’ve been through so much since then.

I imagine each of you, scanning your calendar 104 weeks ago, could find similar experiences, lasts that you did not yet know were lasts. How quickly in those weeks chaos became commonplace, and the illusion of our control entirely evaporated. Within days, the concept of clearing took on deeper and broader meaning. One of you wrote me an email and said, “I think you’re taking this Lent theme a little too seriously.” The prospect of quarantine, that’s the forty-day journey in the desert during Lent, became a little too real, a little too personal. We began using words like unprecedented, uncertain, unusual, unknown, and unique. And we’ve been using those words ever since.

In recent months, though, I’ve experienced—both personally and as a church leader—a fierce urge to reclaim ordinariness. To get back to normal. I feel it when our family tries to make plans for summer vacation. I feel it when I think of our son, Ben, who will start kindergarten in the fall and was two years old when all of this began. I feel it at Second when we talk about our plans for Easter Sunday, and I take in the reality that in nearly four years of ministry here, I’ve experienced a grand total of one “normal” Easter. And I certainly feel it when I absorb the stinging indignation of those whose criticism of decisions has gone from mild frustration to a burning rage. Don’t we all long for the ordinary days, the normal lives, that preceded pandemic? Ah, to go back again.

Of course, that is the one choice not available to us. Time moves relentlessly, and it only moves in one direction. Objects in motion continue in motion, and clocks are always in motion. Change is constant. You can’t go home again. You can’t go back again. You can’t rewind the clock or turn back the calendar.

Still, I’d like to suggest that the commencement of this, another Lenten season, another month of March, offers us an invitation, not to return to the past or fret over the future, but to pause in the present. As we long for the return of the ordinary or press into the future hoping we’ll find it there, the season of Lent insists that right here and right now is where God meets us. Not in some remembered past or imagined future. Right here. Right now. This year, our journey through Lent will encourage us to look not to the unprecedented or the spectacular, but to the presence of the sacred in the mundane moments we mostly miss. We’ll spend the next six weeks asking

God to join us not only on the mountaintop we heard about last Sunday but also in the carpool line, the grocery store, the coffee shop, the waiting room, the dining room table—wherever our ordinary lives may take us.

At the outset of this series, I want to acknowledge the apparent incongruity in this approach. While we seek a return to normalcy, we read moment-by-moment accounts of our global neighbors in Ukraine whose normal lives have been completely upended and whose mortal lives are at great risk. The power of unrestrained evil and the violence it has unleashed should never be accepted by people of faith. On Monday evening, leaders from many religious traditions gathered to pray for peace here in our sanctuary and, as the community was gathering before the service, I heard these phrases many times: “We just wanted to do something; we’ve been feeling so powerless.” Yes, there is much that is outside our control and certainly beyond our comprehension, but let me suggest that the spiritual discipline of awareness is an example of doing something. Living our lives with deeper spiritual intention and more sacred focus is one way we stand in solidarity with the suffering, one way we avoid the sin of apathy.

This year’s journey through Lent asks us to focus our attention and our intention on some of the things we encounter in our daily living. In preparing for this series, I’ve been reminded of a favorite lyric from Hoosier songwriter Carrie Newcomer—

*Holy is the dish and drain  
The soap and sink, and the cup and plate  
And the warm wool socks, and the cold white tile*

*Shower heads and good dry towels  
And frying eggs sound like psalms  
With bits of salt measured in my palm  
It’s all a part of a sacrament  
As holy as a day is spent<sup>1</sup>*

Here’s what I think that means for us. If we begin to look for the presence of God in the ordinary—washing dishes and frying eggs—we will find that

we are never separated from holiness. We will train ourselves to experience this world as it truly is, saturated in divinity. And this developed awareness will bless us and those we encounter. It will deepen our life of prayer, broaden our engagement with the needs of the world. So, welcome to Lent in plain sight. Let’s get started.

It’s an ancient story that God’s people have never forgotten. Through divine providence, the Israelites have been liberated from slavery in Egypt and have made their way into the wilderness—the desert—led by the spirit of God in the form of a fire and a cloudy pillar. We know—and they should know—they are on their way to the Promised Land, freed at last from the tyranny of Pharaoh. They have experienced the unmatched power of the only God, seen it firsthand. But that was several chapters ago now. God’s people have grown weary. They are hungry. Their memories are short, and their physical needs more tangible than this spiritual hope Moses keeps on preaching. They begin to complain (the word complain appears seven times in these fourteen verses). They complain against God and against their human leadership. They’re annoyed. They’re exhausted, frustrated, afraid. And so the people of God, freed by God’s own providential hand, throw a pity party in the wilderness. Forgetting the God of abundant grace who got them this far, they suggest that perhaps the plan all along had been to lead them into the wilderness to kill them with hunger.

Before we’re quick to judge our ancient ancestors, I wonder how often our awe and wonder are replaced by anxiety and self-concern. The unending onslaught of daily stress strains our faith. We forget the road we have traveled. I imagine conversations among Israelites. “Did we cross the parted waters of the Red Sea back there, or was that all just an illusion? After all, where is God *right now*?” The Israelites are us, our stand-ins, our representatives. We play their part in the story, and I for one can fully identify with their difficulty trusting, even given all they have seen and experienced. My spiritual life resembles their struggle. I have what

Barbara Brown Taylor calls a “lunar” faith, the kind that waxes and wanes, changes with context and circumstances. I wonder if anyone else can relate to this lunar faith.

Well, you heard the rest of this story. Early one morning, the Israelites come out of their tents, and they discover an odd flaky substance covering the ground like dew. They ask a question. “*What is it?*” In Hebrew, that sounds like this: *manna*. And manna becomes its name. *What is it?* It is daily bread. *What is it?* It is enough for this day. *What is it?* It is symbol and sign of a universal truth too easily forgotten. God provides.

Whenever we are overcome with anxiety over the future or engaged in relentless self-pity for what we wish we had, we would do well to remember this. God provides. When we are searching for instant gratification, or when we want all the answers at once, we would do well to return to this truth. God provides. To remember the provision of God preserved in stories like this one handed down from generation to generation. To remember the provision of God in our own narratives as well. When has God provided for you in the wilderness? This story reminds us that God’s providence is never dependent on the consistency of our faith. Thanks be to God. God just keeps providing what we need. *Daily bread.*

The people of God never forgot this story. And so, in Nazareth, a young boy named Jesus would have grown up learning this story in Sunday school. He would have memorized the text, and so when it comes time for him to teach his disciples how to pray, this story is in his mind. He teaches his disciples to pray, asking God, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Give us, O God, what we need for *this* day. Tomorrow brings new fears and anxieties, new possibilities and invitations. Help us focus on *this* day, this moment, this manna, this ordinary meal. Help us to see it, to recognize it, to receive it with gratitude.

God provides. But that’s not the only message this story has to teach us today. The assurance and

promise of God’s constant provision has a practical purpose, a clear command. The abundance is meant to shape us into a community reliant on God’s grace *and* eager to share it with others.

The Israelites have lived for so long under the oppressive regime of Pharaoh where scarcity was the law of the land that they find it difficult to trust God’s abundance raining down from heaven. And so, they hastily gather it up—as much as they can. But a funny thing happens when they measure it. The writer of Exodus records, “Those who gathered too much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage.” When they hoard the gift of God, it rots. Does that sound familiar? The message is clear. Our dependence on God’s generosity is one part of the equation. The daily bread God provides must be shared if it is to be enjoyed. We are dependent on God, yes. And we are interdependent as well. *Give us...our* daily bread. Not me and mine. Us. Ours.

The last ten days, like the last two years, we have witnessed extraordinary suffering and unthinkable loss. Those words are surfacing again. Unprecedented, uncertain. If we look closely enough, we also witness acts of humanity that tell a different story. A story of selfless grace, heroic courage. In the last ten days, like the last two years, we have seen interdependence on a global scale. We’ve seen simple deeds of kindness, the persistent power of prayer, words shared with love—all these ordinary things that shine like a light in the darkness, that flow like a river in the desert, that come like manna in the wilderness. With subtlety and sometimes silence, they preach their sermons: Do not be afraid. Do not give up hope. Do not stop looking for the light, the river, the manna. Enough for today.

Whenever I doubt it, and I do doubt it, something or someone offers a fragment—a morsel, a crumb, a word, a story, a song, a look, a touch. Something or someone stirs up my soul and fills my sail enough for today. On Thursday evening, I had finished reading to our son, Ben, and he was drifting toward sleep. He

asked how many days until his birthday. “Only seven more days, Son!” A huge smile, closed eyes. I thought we were finished, but then:

*Dad?*

Yes, Son?

*Why do people fight?*

Lots of reasons, but it’s always sad whenever it happens.

*Dad?*

Yes, Son?

*Maybe on their birthdays they could all stop fighting, and then they would not be so sad on that day.*

Manna in the wilderness. Daily Bread.

Friends, receive what you need today, but please take some to share. Amen.