

“Your Fill of Bread in the Morning”

Exodus 16.2-15

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 20, 2020

Well, here we are! Welcome to our first-ever livestream experience at Mason First Presbyterian Church. This is a new adventure and challenge for all of us, and I cannot tell you how relieved I am that we are actually managing to pull it off. I realize it's not perfect, but hey – it's working!

If you've been following along with our audio recordings throughout the summer, or the printed worship materials we've put out by email and posted on our church website, you know that we've been hearing some of the key stories from the book of Exodus in the past few weeks: the oppression of the Israelites under Pharaoh's yoke, the birth and rescue of baby Moses, God calling Moses from the burning bush, the institution of the Passover, the escape from Egypt and the victory at the Red Sea. Now we are at the point in the story where the Israelites have escaped into the wilderness – and they suddenly find themselves in a tremendously difficult situation that they were not at all equipped to deal with. The pressing issue is *food*: they're *hungry*. They're afraid they're going to *starve* out there. They're frustrated, angry, worried, despondent, and very scared. In short – a lot like *we* are, in 2020.

What I want to do this morning is reflect a bit on the *wilderness journey* we find *ourselves* in, in this year that hasn't been much fun. I heard a joke a few weeks ago; two people are in a time machine, trying to decide what year to visit. They conclude: *Not 2020! Any year but 2020!* I want to reflect a bit on the *effect* that 2020 has had on all of us. Then I want to look back at the Exodus story, considering how God provided for his people back then ... and how God still provides for us *today*.

It's been a year. And it's not over yet. I was listening to a podcast on Friday, that was recorded back in April or May. The people on the show were talking about what an incredibly long road it had been since the coronavirus pandemic started changing all our lives. It was interesting to hear them talk. It had only been about six weeks at that point, and they were already feeling like it had been a really long haul. Now it's been *six months*. Six months of *so much* of our normal lives disrupted. Everything has changed. School. Work. Church. Sports. Grocery store trips. Social activities. Eating out. Vacations. Visiting relatives. Healthcare. Even just going for a walk. Some of you have had major disruptions in your employment. Some of our friends or family members are living in residential facilities where they have been largely confined to their room day after day, week after week, having meals brought to their room, instead of eating in the dining area. The changes to our everyday lives have been sweeping, dramatic, difficult and, at times, downright scary.

Then there are the deaths. Almost 200,000 in the United States. Nearly a million worldwide. I don't personally know anyone who has died from COVID-19, but maybe some of you do.

Add to that the misinformation. There has been a tremendous amount of misinformation

posted and shared. Some of that was by people who didn't know any better; some of it was by people who did. The misinformation has created confusion, anger, unnecessary deaths, and mistrust.

That's all one package – the coronavirus, and everything that goes with it. Then there are the racial justice issues. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. The protests, the counter-protests, the violence in some places, the people driving cars into demonstrators, what happened in Lafayette Square, what has been happening in Portland, the march on Washington, *so much more*.

Then, of course, it's an election year. In the midst of a pandemic. Plus a whole lot of drama in the post office, that has undermined people's trust. Not to mention wildfires and hurricanes!

Now, a day and a half ago, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died, who was a real hero to many women in this country. When was the last time there was a huge candlelight vigil when a Supreme Court Justice died? And now another *huge* battle has erupted over the timing of the appointment of her successor.

This has not been a fun year. Wherever you land on the political spectrum, I'm sure we can all agree that this year has not been easy for anybody. We long for this nightmare to be *over*.

Are we on the verge of starving, the way the Israelites were in the wilderness? No. It's frustrating when you go to the grocery store and you can't find paper towels, or the specific ingredients you are looking for, for that meal you want to make. But we're not starving. Not *physically*, at least.

But how are we doing *emotionally*? How are we doing *spiritually*? Are we getting enough *emotional and spiritual nourishment* to *cope* with it all? To patiently *endure* from one day to the next?

The Israelites ended up spending forty years in the wilderness. *Forty years* without a normal roof over their heads, without a place to call "home." The distance is not that great. It's just a few hundred miles. You could drive it in a day. Walking, at a leisurely pace, should only take a matter of weeks. But for the Israelites, it *forty years*. Forty years of patient – or not-so-patient – endurance.

This pandemic is taking a lot longer to get through than any of us expected. The Spanish flu a century ago lasted more than two years. I don't *think* it's going to take us that long to get through this. I hope it will be more like *one* year. Still, that's a very long time for our lives to be so disrupted.

So the question is, are you getting enough *emotional and spiritual* nourishment to *survive*?

During the Israelites' long sojourn in the wilderness, God provided for their basic needs. "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." The Israelites called it *manna*. Day after day, God provided – "meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning." Protein and carbs. *Food* for the journey.

But it didn't just appear miraculously on their dinner plates, ready for them to eat. They had some work to do. They had to catch and cook the quail. They had to gather the manna. They had to be *intentional* about making sure that they would get their nourishment. If they got lazy, they would starve. *God provided* – God made it very possible for them to survive – but they still had to *work* at it.

Isn't the same true for us, with our *emotional and spiritual* hunger, during our long sojourn in this wilderness? God provides for our *emotional* needs. We still have friends. We still have family members. We might not be able to spend time with them like normal, but we can pick up the phone

and give them a call. There are still good books to read. Great music to enjoy. Movies or TV shows – maybe some classics that you have heard about but never seen. Disney Plus made *Hamilton* available inexpensively; that’s an artistic *masterpiece*. There are things you can learn, online classes you can take. Some zoos have webcams that allow you to watch your favorite animals, live. There are still plenty of things you can do that will bring you joy. *God still provides*. But you may need to be *intentional* about it. You may have to do a little work. Gather some manna, *for yourself*. The good things in life don’t usually just *appear* right in front of you, ready for you to use. You have to go *get* them. God provides – but if you don’t go *gather some of that manna for yourself*, it’s just going to *sit* there and go to waste.

Some of you may need some additional support. If you need a counselor, go find a counselor. I can’t tell you how many people I have known who have personally benefited from seeing a counselor. I also can’t tell you how many people I have known who resisted the suggestion, who really *should* have sought out some extra help. There’s nothing wrong with saying, “I need a little extra emotional support right now.” Many insurance plans make it pretty easy to get help. Check with your provider. Some insurance plans give you the first few sessions *for free*.

And what about your *spiritual* health? The Israelites needed both manna *and* quail; they needed the carbs *and* the protein. We need to tend to both our emotional health *and* our spiritual health. They are not the same. Speaking for myself, I know that my spiritual life has suffered these past six months. I had a nice routine I was enjoying, but I have not kept up with it very well over these last few months. Partly that’s because of extra demands on my time; partly that’s because of the additional stress and strain that *all* of us are experiencing. One of the things I’m trying to do as we move into fall is get back into it again, to make sure I am giving my soul the nourishment it needs. There are all sorts of resources out there. There are many devotionals, some of which are online. There are many uplifting Christian books, and a number of good podcasts. Some churches and other Christian organizations have been able to offer daily live devotionals online during this pandemic. You have to be a little careful; sometimes the theology is a little over-the-top, not exactly *our* version of Christianity, but you can find some gold nuggets here and there. Over the years I’ve had seasons when particular Christian authors have spoken *volumes* to me, and I devoured every word I could get from them, because they were so incredibly *helpful*. God provides. Again, you may need to be *intentional* about it. You may have to do a little work. Go catch and cook some quails, for yourself. Nobody else can do that work for you. What did God say? “I’m going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day *the people shall go out and gather enough for that day*.” God provides – but *we have to gather it, all on our own*.

For the Israelites, their very *lives* depended on it. For us – it’s just our emotional and spiritual well-being. Wait, did I say “just” our emotional and spiritual well-being? Aren’t those things we *need*?

If there is something that you have really enjoyed, something that has really benefited *your* emotional or spiritual life, I’d like to encourage you to share it. Type it in the Chat. Spread the wealth. There’s probably someone out there who could benefit from the very thing that *you* benefited from. What has helped *you* during this pandemic? What has been *your* manna and quail in the wilderness?

© 2020 Rev. Bill Pinches