

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Wilderness Cuisine”
Exodus 16:1-18
October 8, 2017

It's only been a month.
One month since they crossed the Red Sea.
One month since they witnessed the plagues of Egypt.
One month since God delivered them out of slavery.

And already they are grumbling.
Actually, this is already the 3rd time in a month the Israelites have been grumbling against God, out in the wilderness.

It's kind of like taking your family on a trip for the holidays to Grandma's house and the kids start fighting in the back seat along the way because the car ride isn't what they expected. (Of course that never happens with our kids. They are perfect.)

But I can just picture Moses and Aaron up in the front seats, losing their tempers with the children of Abraham:

“Don't make me come back there,” Moses says. And still they grumble.

“Do you want me to turn this caravan around?” Aaron asks. “Because I will! Don't tempt me!”

Of course the problem is, they do... want to go back.
It's part of what's so striking about this story.

One month out of Egypt and they are ready to go back...
back to what they knew,
back to the way things were,
back to what was dependable... even if what was dependable was far from holy.

It's an ancient impulse, you know. It's one we all have.
You start out on a journey...

Maybe you start on a big project... that's going to require a whole lot of you. A lot of sacrifice, of time, and money, and energy. Or maybe you start a difficult conversation... that not everyone wants to have...and things get tense. People start complaining, and you want to go back.

Apparently, this is not what they signed up for. The promise of a land flowing with milk and honey is coming up a bit short.

No one told them about the hard road to get there.

No one told them that between Egypt and the Promised Land... there is a long journey that must be taken through the wilderness.

No one told them about the challenges they'd face,
or the people they'd lose,
or even how long it would take.

40 years? Are you kidding me?

And they are feeling a bit duped here... tricked by Moses and tricked by God because the wilderness is **not** what they were expecting.

They want to go back.

Sure, they've gained their freedom, but there's a lot of risk in this freedom. Life on the other side of the Red Sea is treacherous and dangerous.... They are headed out into the great unknown. And it's so risky.

And this ... is just the beginning of their journey... ***there is still such a long way to go***, and they already want to go back...

Because this is not what they expected it would be.

That's how it often is, you know.

Some great moment comes, some arrival, some deliverance perhaps. Maybe some change you've been hoping for. You couldn't help but think, "If it will just come, everything will be better."

And so, let's say... you graduate from high school, or you graduate from college, and you're so excited about what's next... only to find out that life on the other side of school is not what you expected.

And you feel a bit like that Adam Sandler character, Billy Madison, when he goes back to elementary school... and a little boy in the elementary school says, "Gee Billy, I can't wait until I go to high school."

And Billy turns around with this serious look in his eyes, "Don't you say that. Don't you ever say that." And he grabs his shirt. "Stay here. Stay as long as you can!"

Life on the other side often isn't what you expect.

Or let's **say you get the job** you've been hoping for, or get the promotion... only to find out that there are new deserts and new demons you will now have to face... that no one told you about.

Or **your baby arrives** and your family grows... only to find out that parenting isn't what you expected... and you are not as strong as you expected... and the challenges you face are not like anything you had imagined.

Or maybe **you finally get to retirement**, and you have a party, and you're so excited and so relieved... until you wake up one day and realize your soul is still grumbling... Maybe it wasn't the job, maybe it was you.

You are starving for something... and so you grumble, because something in you is still addicted to the fleshpots of Egypt.

Or let's say, **you build some new building** and you're so excited and you celebrate, because you certainly should. But you forgot that the celebration wasn't the ending, but just the beginning... the beginning of a journey into the unknown wilderness of faith that God is inviting us into....

a journey that will cost us something,

a journey where there will most certainly be unexpected frustrations, and new hunger... and surprising challenges to face.

The Israelites had seen God do some amazing things in their midst. The power of plagues over the power of Egypt. The awe of parting the Red Sea. It was everything they had been waiting for, all those generations enslaved there in Egypt.

But the dancing and celebration on the shores of the Red Sea, the songs of Moses and the tambourine of Miriam, have already faded into distant echoes by now.

A month into their journey, and the celebration is like dust in the wind. And now, they are having to learn...

Who this God, that's done amazing things in their midst, really is...

And what it's actually like to follow this God.

In other words, they are discovering that the highpoints are not the end of the journey... but just the beginning.

And they are discovering that the highpoints by themselves will not sustain them for the journey.

That's always true, you know.... as much as we tend to forget it so easily. The big moments by themselves... will not sustain you for the long haul.

Something else is needed....

Something more normal... something simple and daily.

Something you can find down in the valley in-between Egypt and the Promised Land...

Because the honest truth is, there in the valley,

there in the wilderness,

is where you will spend most of your life.

That's what the Israelites are having to learn.

The highlight moments, the Red Sea and Sinai moments, are a gift. But they will not sustain them along the way.

Something else is needed.

Something much more normal.

Something as ***ordinary ... as bug juice.***

Didn't see that one coming did you?

Neither did they.

But that's what they get.

God tells them to go out every morning and collect this strange substance out there in the wilderness of Sinai. The Bible says that they called it Manna, which means, "What is it?"

But if you go to the wilderness of Sinai, it won't stay a mystery very long.

There is a type of plant lice that punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree... and then excretes a substance from this juice... a yellowish-white flake or ball...

And this substance has a sweet taste. It's rich in carbohydrates and sugar. And it is there in the cool of the morning, but disintegrates in the warmth of the day. In fact, it has a tendency to attract ants if it hangs around too long.

So the Bedouins who still live in that wilderness today... only collect a daily portion. And yes, they will bake it into a kind of bread, and guess what they call it? Manna.

I know, for some of you hearing this practical, normal, explanation takes away from the miracle of this story. But I would challenge that line of thinking.

I mean, does manna have to come out of nowhere to be a miracle?

Or is the miracle that God heard the complaining of the hungry people and God fed them with **bug juice** – with food they would have **never** thought to eat?

Or to put it another way, is the miracle the substance itself?

Or our ability to recognize the One who provides it for us?

Barbra Brown Taylor suggests that, “how you answer those questions has a lot to do with how you sense God’s presence in your life. If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to go hungry a lot.

When you do not get the miracle you are praying for, you are going to think that God is ignoring you or punishing you or—worse yet—that God is not there.

You are going to start comparing yourself to other people and wondering why they seem to have more to eat than you do, and you may start complaining to heaven about that.

Meanwhile, you are going to miss a lot of other things God is doing for you because they [are hidden there in the] ordinary...

If, on the other hand, you are willing to look at everything that comes to you as coming to you from God, then there will be no end to the manna in your life. A can of beans will be manna. Bug juice will be manna. Nothing will be too ordinary to remind you of God...”¹

That’s what the Israelites are having to learn out in the wilderness. God feeds us in the ordinary stuff of life. God meets us in the ordinary. That’s how we are sustained for the journey most of the time.

We encounter God’s grace in the texture, and simplicity, and regular patterns of our day. In the daily grind.

In the daily provision... even when the wilderness journey you’re on isn’t what you expected.

God tells them “Go out every day, and gather enough... just enough for today.”

You see, most of your spiritual journey won’t be

Red-Sea-crossing,

or Mt.-Sinai-shattering,

or Promised-Land-entering, kind of moments.

Most of your encounters with God will happen in the low lands, traveling in-between... where you’re not where you’ve been, and you’re not exactly sure where you’re going... and all you will be given is enough... for this day. Enough...for today. Can you see it? Will you recognize it?

So, as we celebrate this monumental moment in the life of our church, as we give thanks to God for this new addition, **let’s remember that this isn’t an arrival of any kind. But it’s more an oasis along the way.**

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, 10.

Yes, it is beautiful and wonderful, and there is so much to celebrate and give thanks for. And there is something about it that is quenching our thirst. Yes, this new space is like a breath of fresh air into the lives of our ministries...

Yes, it will help us do a better job of nurturing a healthy spirituality for our children and teenagers.

Yes, we are embodying the hopes of generations past.

But don't be deceived. We have not arrived. Tomorrow we keep walking. And tomorrow, we will have to learn to find God even in the gift of the bug juice we are given.

There are still budgets to work on and more sacrificial giving to make.

There are still people to minister to and strangers to meet.

There are still new challenges and new opportunities we haven't quite imagined

There are still children to love that we haven't met,
and outsiders to welcome that might make us nervous.

There is still hope and reconciliation to embody.

There is still a calling that we have....

to be part of God's blessing,

God's healing, and life... out there, in the wilderness.

And to do that... we can't stay at the oasis. We have to venture out into the wild unknown... out where we will keep learning to seek God in the ordinary, strange manna that comes to us.

So keep your eyes open for it.

Keep your hearts hungry...

remember manna is about more than food for your stomach. It's about food for your soul.

Remember that moment in the gospels where after Jesus fed the 5 thousand, the crowds got so excited. They wanted more... It reminded them of this ancient story and they figured they had their own Moses on hand.

But then Jesus reminded them that manna came from God, not from Moses. "Give us some of that," they said.

So Jesus told them that if they wanted manna, they would have to learn to feed of his flesh and drink of his blood, which trust me, sounded to them a lot like drinking bug juice.

And so they grumbled. A lot of folks started to leave. They wanted more miracles, not a relationship with this man. And so he told them not what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to see, "I am the bread of life," he said.

Jesus is God's manna to us in the wilderness. He is our food for the journey. He is the one who reminds us what it means to live by the grace of God.

[move to table]

And so, on that night before he was crucified, Jesus gathered with his disciples. He took the bread... this is my body.

In the same way... he took the cup... this is my blood.

This is our manna for the long haul.

And so this morning, we're going to do something a little different to receive communion. I'm going to ask you to pray for the journey that Dayspring is taking.

If there is anything we know for sure from ***the Israelites' journey, it's that wilderness wandering is full of unexpected challenges***. It's mighty easy to get lost along the way.
It has unexpected twists and turns.

So, in your worship guide there is a blank card with the Generation to Generation logo on it. I want to ask you to spend the next several minutes writing on that card a prayer for Dayspring... for the challenges we will face... as we journey with God beyond this day.

And when you are done writing your prayer for Dayspring... bring it to the prayer chapel. As you enter the prayer chapel, walk across the back, and down the side by the windows, and up to the beautiful communion table.

I invite you to place your prayer in the bowl on that table as a way of offering your prayer to God. In fact, I want to invite you to hold your prayer over the bowl and say aloud, "Lord, hear my prayers."

Then we're going to gather all those prayers and display them for the next few months as a way of allowing these prayers to soak into the life of Dayspring.

And then, after you've offered your prayer,

Go to one of the two communion stations to receive communion. And in the simple bread and cup, know that you are being offered manna for today.

Then make your way back into the sanctuary.

We know this will take some time, but that's OK.

Don't feel rushed.

Go ahead now... as our communion servers come up to take communion to the prayer chapel.

Go ahead now, open your heart, take out your pen... and begin to write your prayer for Dayspring.