

Proper 13, Year B

- Confession to make - some may know this already, but for those who don't, wanted you to hear it from me first rather than just find out somewhere else, or gradually put it together on your own
- Confession is this: I really, really love Scripture
- Maybe not so shocking a confession to hear from a clergy person - though I've met a few that I've wondered about
- But as I looked at the readings for this week, I got excited, and said I can even start this sermon talking about how **this** is one of my all-time favorite passages of Scripture... but this is my seventh Sunday here, and I've already said that at least a few different times
- Still! Doesn't make it any less true: I **love** this story from Exodus, the story of manna in the wilderness
- One of those really fundamental stories - stories that come to define our faith
- Long enough tale that we don't hear the entirety of it: just the sort of Cliffs' Notes version
- So I want to fill in the parts that aren't here, just in case you haven't heard them, or haven't heard them recently
- Our story picks up right after another famous scene from Exodus, as the Israelites are fleeing Egypt, and the Red Sea is parted for them and then the waters brought crashing back as the Egyptians try to follow, to place the Israelites back in captivity
- Everyone is exultant, they rejoice at what God has done in setting them free - we hear the Song of Moses - one of Canticles used at MP - rejoicing that God has saved God's people
- And immediately people start complaining because they're in the wilderness - same chapter as Song of Moses has people complaining that there isn't any water to drink - and yet, in the midst of the wilderness, God provides
- And then this, the very next chapter - about a month and a half later - people complain again, even more loudly - "if only we'd died in Egypt," they say, "we wouldn't have to start out here in the wilderness." - iow, "at least we would have died in comfort, rather than starving."
- Last week, if you were here, heard me talk about how God cares about our earthly existence - God wants to see us fed, wants our needs met - and **this story** is a big part of how I know that to be true
- Because there is no other explanation for what God does next - just like Jesus feeding the 5,000 with bread and fish that aren't nearly enough to go around - God says, "I am going

to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.”

- Every day, they're told, gather enough for that day, and no more
- Now bear with me just a moment here, because I have another confession to make: this is essentially a stewardship sermon - even though it's mid-August and the annual pledge campaign is nowhere in sight!
- It's impossible, I think, to read this story, this story so foundational to our faith, and **not** think of stewardship
- Because the command to only gather enough bread - miraculous bread that's fallen out of the sky and into the laps of a people who are starving in the wilderness - speaks to two fundamental truths about stewardship:
- First, because this bread is so miraculous, so completely inexplicable, it illustrates one of those facts that's true about literally everything, but that we (and the ancients Israelites) can often forget about: **everything** comes from God
- When you and I go and buy bread at the grocery store, or even the supplies to make our own bread at the grocery store, it's easy to forget: the items on those shelves came from somewhere - the bread was baked by a baker, who bought all the supplies from a grocery store, which purchased the flour from a mill and the eggs from a poultry farmer
- And if you trace it back far enough, you realize that most everything we encounter on a daily basis springs up out of the earth - inexplicably, often with very little effort from us - all of it, every last bit of the world we encounter, was created - **is** created and re-created daily - by God
- The Israelites, confronted with bread falling down out of the sky, were confronted with forcefully with this fact that often escaped them, and often escapes us: but for God, we would have nothing - it is God alone who provides, and everything we have and everything we see comes from God
- That's the first truth about stewardship: that offering back to God what is God's is not a sacrifice on our part, but a recognition that everything we have was a gift, anyway, and part of what we do with that is recognize it, and give thanks by offering it back to God - we pray that God will help us to recognize that all bread might as well be falling into our hands from out of the sky - because, as we say, "all things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee."
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- We all struggle with that, myself included, but nowhere near as much as we tend to struggle with the second fundamental truth about stewardship that this story of manna in the desert illustrates:
- And that truth is this: we don't live in a world of scarcity - we live in a world of abundance
- This is illustrated not only by bread appearing from the heavens, basically out of nowhere, but also by the further detail that God goes on to tell the Israelites, although they're to gather bread for each day, on the 6th day, they're supposed to gather enough bread for that day and the next - so that they can keep the Sabbath
- And keeping the Sabbath is about rest, is about our own health and well-being, yes, but it's also trying to retrain us to recognize that one simple fact: we live in a world of abundance - we live in a world where God provides - if we aren't willing to take a day off, if we aren't willing to trust in God from time to time to provide more than we can imagine, then it's easier for us to think that we've earned everything we have - to forget that all of it was provided by God in the first place
- This is probably the most difficult concept, most countercultural thing about following Christ, in our day and age - not just keeping Sabbath in a culture that puts a premium on productivity, that sees a benefit in being busy - but:
- Our entire economy, in some ways our entire culture, is built upon scarcity - if you don't believe me, think about how many times you've seen marketing campaigns focusing on "limited editions," or telling you to act now, "while supplies last."
- Think about how many times you've gone to the store "so you don't run out" of something, even if you probably had enough to make it another day - "just to be safe"
- Or think about Amazon Dash buttons - heard of these? Buttons you can place in house near regularly-used items so when you're running low, you can just push a button and Amazon will charge you and ship you a new package of peanut butter, or toilet paper, or laundry detergent - because almost nothing produces more anxiety than the threat of running out
- Even hard wired into our bodies, into our very DNA - our bodies, without our knowing, recognize our caloric intake - how much we're eating, and how rich the food is, and decides whether it's feast or famine - and our body's metabolism actually **slows down** to burn fewer calories in the lean times - our bodies are on high alert for times of scarcity, and try to conserve precious resources - it's called "metabolic adaptation" and it's why a lot of modern diet plans build in a "cheat day" of some sort - you have to fool your body into

thinking it's a period of abundance - that food is plentiful - in order to bring your metabolism back up

- So it's no wonder, with the world and our bodies both telling us that we need to be on the alert for scarcity, that the thought of running out, of not having enough, is probably the #1 worry, the biggest source of anxiousness for us today
- So it is a radical demand that God makes in saying that the Israelites are not to gather on the Sabbath - they are to trust that God has provided enough on that sixth day - to worry not about scarcity, but to recognize, to rely upon, God's abundance
- And so we're not always in the wilderness, we're not always living day-to-day, fed only by the hand of God, by bread falling from the sky and landing right in front of us
- But in some ways, that makes it harder for us - because we can forget that it's God who provided it all in the first place
- And so it is countercultural, it is radical, when we pray no less than every single Sunday: "Give us this day our daily bread." - we pray to God to give us today our bread for today - and to help us recognize what "enough" actually looks like - to help us see the abundance around us - the abundance of God's creation that we have been entrusted with, that we have been made stewards of
- That is why this story is so fundamental, why Jesus spends an entire chapter in John talking about being the true bread from heaven - he's seeking to remind us, through this story, that everything on this earth, including life itself, is a gift from God - a precious gift that we've been entrusted with
- He wants us to see that despite how it seems sometimes, this world isn't one of scarcity - that God is a God of abundance - of incredible, inexplicable, bread-falling-from-the-sky abundance - and there is **always** more than enough to go around