

## Enough Is Enough

Parents, does this story sound familiar? You've taken the children out of town for the weekend spending a fortune at several fun places, staying at a hotel, preparing snacks for the journey, eating at their favorite restaurants, and dedicating the entire time to family-friendly activities. It's been a great weekend with memories that will last forever. You're exhausted but happy to have spent this special time with your children. And then, in the car on the way home, you hear, "I'm bored! There's nothing to do! Why can't we do something fun?"

Now, lest you think I'm being too hard on children, it's true that adults do this sort of thing as well. I know of a woman who wanted to go out to eat with her family on her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Family members came from out of town. One of them brought dessert purchased at a restaurant in Chicago. There was plenty of good food. It was a lovely celebration. However, even though she was too polite to say anything to her family, the woman felt a bit let-down when it was all over. The restaurant was her 2<sup>nd</sup> choice because her 1<sup>st</sup> choice had closed a few weeks before her birthday. She thought they'd be seated in a more private location in the restaurant instead of in the middle of a very crowded room. And, she had requested chocolate chip cheesecake, not chocolate chip cookie dough cheesecake for the dessert. Didn't her brother know the difference? (This woman chooses to remain anonymous, however, she bears a striking resemblance to the pastor of Salina Mennonite Church.)

Similar scenarios play out in our relationship with God. Sometimes we forget what God has just done for us and attempt to dictate what God should do next. Sometimes we forget to thank God for what God has done and instead blame God for what we think God is not doing. Sometimes little disappointments prevent us from being truly grateful for what God has done. Sometimes we know that we have enough of what we need, but we continue to ask for more. Sometimes our preconceived notions of how God should act prevent us from seeing what God is already doing.

An example of this is the familiar parable of a drowning man. One version goes like this: A man was trapped in his house during a flood. He began praying to God to rescue him. He had a vision in his head of God's hand reaching down from heaven and lifting him to safety. The water started to rise in his house. His neighbor urged him to leave and offered him a ride to safety. The man yelled back, "I am waiting for God to save me." The neighbor then drove off in his pick-up truck.

The man continued to pray and hold on to his vision. As the water began rising in his house, he had to climb up to the roof. A boat came by with some people heading for safe ground. They yelled at the man to grab a rope so they could take him to safety. He told them that he was waiting for God to save him. They shook their heads and moved on.

The man continued to pray, believing with all his heart that he would be saved by God. The floodwaters continued to rise. A helicopter flew by and a voice came over a loudspeaker offering to lower a ladder and take him off the roof. The man waved the helicopter away, shouting back that he was waiting for God to save him. The helicopter left. The flooding water came over the roof and caught him up and swept him away. He drowned.

When he reached heaven and asked, "God, why did you not save me? I believed in you with all my heart. Why did you let me drown?" God replied, "I sent you a pick-up truck, a boat, and a helicopter and you refused all of them. What else could I possibly do for you?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable\\_of\\_the\\_drowning\\_man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_drowning_man); <https://firefightersupport.org/the-drowning-man/>.

We see elements of each of these stories played out in Exodus 15-17.<sup>2</sup>

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God. Deep groans that come from the depths of their being. Exhaustion and physical pain from the work they were forced to do. Despair over the hopelessness of the situation. Anguish over suffering of their children.

God heard them and commissioned Moses to lead them. God said, “I’ve taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people. I’ve heard their cries for deliverance; I know all about their pain. And now I have come to pry them loose from the grip of Egypt and bring them to a lush land with wide-open spaces.”<sup>3</sup> God said, “I am who I am; I will be who I will be. God said, “Wait and see. I will be your deliverer, savior, liberator.”<sup>4</sup>

And God delivered in a big way! God overcame Pharaoh through contests of authority and power. Israel expressed their allegiance to God by following the instructions for the Passover. God used the Red Sea to allow them to escape from Pharaoh. A liberated Israel celebrated God’s final victory in great songs of praise.<sup>5</sup>

Now we meet the community of Israelites on the move in the wilderness scrubland of Sinai. There are a lot of them, and water and food are scarce. As you might expect, the community isn’t happy.

There are three stories in this part of Exodus relating to the physical needs of the community and their appeal to Moses and Aaron. Two short stories about the provision of water frame a larger story of the provision of manna and quail in the desert. All three stories depict God’s gracious provision for the people and patient response to their appeals. All along the way God’s message is, “Enough is enough. Having enough for the moment is enough. Trust that I will provide.”

The first water story comes immediately after the Israelites’ passage through the Red Sea.<sup>6</sup> They travel for three days in the desert before they find water. But the water is so bitter they can’t drink it. The people complain to Moses, “We’re dying of thirst. What are we supposed to drink?” Moses appeals to God who tells him to throw a log into the bitter water. When Moses follows God’s instruction the water becomes sweet. God promises that if the people will listen and follow God’s ways, then their needs will be met.

The second story of provision comes after 45 days on the move in the desert when the grumbling – the murmuring, the complaining – begins again.<sup>7</sup> “Moses, Aaron, why didn’t God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You’ve brought us out into this wilderness to starve all of us to death!”

And God hears them – again; and responds – again. Once again, God uses a series of signs to demonstrate that “I am who I am and I will be who I will be.” Instead of demonstrations of crushing power over the tyrannical power of an oppressor, these signs aimed at the disheartened people in the wilderness show God’s merciful, sustaining power.

God responds graciously despite the grumbling, by providing meat and bread. Meat comes in the form of quails. It’s possible the meat was already available, but for some reason they hadn’t yet recognized it as God’s provision. Quails are small, plump game birds that breed in Europe and Western Asia, but migrate to Africa for the winter, passing through Palestine and Sinai. Head wind or exhaustion can force them to the ground, where they can be easily caught.

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<sup>2</sup> This sermon draws from the Week Eleven Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Pulpit Fiction Podcast, [Proper 20A \(OT 25\) — Pulpit Fiction](#) & [Proper 21A \(OT 26\) — Pulpit Fiction](#); Spill the Beans, Pentecost 2a 2011 – Sunday 18 & 25 September 2011, [Home | Spill The Beans](#); and Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.197-222.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:7-8

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:14-22

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 7:8-15:21

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 15:22-27

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 16:1-36

Bread comes in a form not immediately recognized by the people. They ask with curiosity, “*Man hu?* What is it?” The phrase *man hu* sounds similar to the word manna, which may explain the origin of the name we’re used to reading. As with the quails, a “natural” explanation may be available. A type of plant lice punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it’s still gathered by the Bedouins, who bake it into a kind of bread (and call it manna). The food decays quickly and attracts ants.

Even if it’s possible to explain the presence of bread and manna in the desert, these natural phenomena can also be seen as part of God’s astonishing provision for Israel.

God’s provision of food for the Israelites includes lessons in trust and obedience. “Gather as much of it as each of you needs” is the basic principle. Each person is to participate, the work isn’t assigned only to a particular group, although I imagine they worked together and helped those who were unable to gather manna for themselves.

The instructions for daily gathering provide lessons about anxiety on the one hand and greed on the other. The Israelites are to learn to trust that God will provide for their needs every day; they don’t have to be anxious. They are also to learn that it’s counterproductive to try to take more than their share; it doesn’t pay to be greedy.

God’s provision also combines spiritual and physical. On the sixth day they are allowed to gather twice as much as necessary because on the seventh day there is no manna available. This begins the idea of Sabbath – a day set aside for a break from the usual routine; a day set aside to worship God.

God’s provision illustrates the importance of looking for God in the natural ordinariness of the everyday. While it seems evident that God is found on the mountaintop – in the supernatural or the extraordinary, God is also present in the natural blessings and beauty which surround us every day.

The third story of provision in the desert – the second water story – wasn’t part of the storytelling earlier in the service. Listen to it now. See if anything sounds familiar.<sup>8</sup>

*The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”*

*Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?”*

*But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”*

*So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”*

*The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River and go. I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched. He called the place Massah [which means test] and Meribah [which means quarrel], because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, “Is the LORD really with us or not?”*

There’s some confusion about the chronology of events, but it seems possible that the story in Exodus 17 takes place after several decades of wandering in the wilderness. Once again, they are uncomfortable. There’s no available water. They’re thirsty. They’re complaining, even now, after all this time, thinking about the “good old days” in Egypt.

They appear to have forgotten what has happened during their time in the desert. During this time, God provided them with water and with food – not in abundance but sufficient for each day.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 17:1-7, *Common English Bible*

During this time, God also gave them instructions about how to worship and how to live together as a people.

Once again, Moses points out that their complaint to him is actually a complaint against God. He redirects their focus to God. Once again, Moses takes the concerns to God. Once again, God promises to provide if Moses will do as instructed. Once again, God provides the Israelites with what they are asking for, with the water they need.

It's easy to be critical of the Israelites with their constant complaining and refusal to trust God and follow God's instructions. We would never do that, would we? The psalmist in Psalm 95 uses the story from Exodus 17 as a negative example. "Do not do what they did at Massah – which means testing – and at Meribah – which means complaining," the psalmist writes. "Instead, sing to the Lord, give thanks, remember God's mighty acts, and worship him."

But, of course, they are human, and so are we. We've asked the question they asked, "Is God with us or not?" Often this question arises when people find themselves in a vulnerable position – physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, spiritually. When they are hungry, thirsty, angry, lonely, tired, scared, anxious, uncertain about the future. When things are great, it's easy to be certain that God is with us. When things are bad it must be because God has abandoned us. It's not unusual for physical discomforts to lead to breakdowns of the spirit.

It could be said that we have been experiencing a version of wandering in the wilderness the past 3 years as life as we knew it changed suddenly. This happened on a large scale, of course, with a global pandemic and lots of uncertainty and many disagreements about how to respond to it. In addition, each of us could point to wilderness experiences in our personal lives – illness, death, unexpected life transitions, and other losses. As we look ahead to 2024, we anticipate changes in congregational leadership. Does it feel like that could be a wilderness experience?

There are plenty of opportunities to ask the same questions the Israelites and Moses asked all those years ago. Do we trust God to take care of the big needs in our lives? Do we trust God to take care of the daily needs of our lives? When the needs of our lives seem unmet, are we likely to begin grumbling? What would happen if we took time to reflect and give thanks for God's goodness? How much is enough?

When I got to this point in the sermon yesterday, I felt like I was in the wilderness. I was tired, hungry, and thirsty. I was sad about something I heard earlier in the day. I was concerned about several people in the congregation. I was feeling guilty about some things I had done and others I had failed to do. I almost complained to God, asking why writing sermon #483 seemed as difficult as writing sermon #1.

So, I shut off my computer, petted my dog, talked to my aunt, and headed home. On the way I chatted with Lois Newcomer. She gave me a much-needed hug even though I hadn't told her how I was feeling. I inhaled the cool, autumn air and felt the warm sun on my face. Before eating supper, my aunt and I took a bit of time to thank God for the blessings of the day. It's impossible to tease out how much of what happens is our effort, how much is just the way things work, how much is chance, and how much is God's work, but something happened while I ate, I gained just enough strength, will, and insight to finish this sermon.

That is my prayer for you, that during each wilderness experience, you can hear God's message, "Enough is enough. Having enough for the moment is enough. Trust that I will provide." And when you can't hear that voice, I pray that there will be people in your life who will listen to your complaints and despair and speak to God on your behalf. And, perhaps, you will do that for others too. We can help each other grow in trust in God.

God knows the needs of our hearts and lives. All things are possible in God's great wisdom and power. Thanks be to God. Amen.

