

***The Shaping of a Congregation***  
***Exodus 16:1-15***  
***September 20, 2020***

The people have crossed the sea of reeds and escaped Pharaoh's army. From the waters of Marah Moses leads them to the oasis of Elim where they rest up for the upcoming journey. Soon, however, as they move forward into the silent, empty wilderness of the Sinai the mood changes again. Hungry, thirsty, footsore, they complain again to Moses: *If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...*

Our story begins with a complaint. Notice that four times they are called the **congregation**. They are being shaped by their experience into a nation, a people of God, a congregation of faith in the line of Abraham. They are united in their insecurity, anxiety and hunger. And four times we are told that God heard their complaint. God again responds to their need by sending this strange bread from heaven that they had no name for. They said, "What is this", or *man hu* in the Hebrew, or as we translate it, **Manna**.

It's not hard to imagine why these former slaves found it just a little frustrating as they looked ahead to the seemingly endless horizon of sand and rocks. All of them have lived under Pharaoh's taskmasters and rules their entire lives. They have never known anything else. Their lives consisted of daily work, regular meals, and definite limits on their mobility. Now their memories are, like most of us looking back, a tad exaggerated. I'm sure when they complained to Moses they are not consulting their photo collection.

You know how it is when we talk to our kids about how we had to walk for miles to school and only got one egg for tea split between two of us. Or that we used to have to walk through three feet of snow to school in winter. Actually, that is true; we did sometimes get an egg split between my brother and me. And no, we never got three feet of snow in my hometown. They exaggerate, like us!

They have forgotten already just how awful it was under Pharaoh. But now under Moses they are told that they are valued as God's children and connected to the covenant family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But endless sand combined with empty bellies has a way of canceling out such notions. They've lived their whole lives inside a prison wall, so to speak, with limits on what, where and how they could live.

Their struggle is not so far removed from ours. They are asked to trust God. It's difficult for any of us to lose control over our lives and listen instead to the silent movement of the Spirit within. We all like to be in control. Trusting that an invisible God loves us, wants the best for us, is with us always, and will never leave us, is not an easy step. It wasn't for them; it's not for us!

God hears and acts. God acknowledges the insecurity and anxiety of the congregation and God's response is concrete and "down to earth" and promises to re-form the once-enslaved people in the **daily and weekly rhythms of provision, labor, satisfaction, and rest**. These rhythms mirror the poetry of creation found in Genesis 1.

The miracle of this white flaky substance that appeared on the ground each morning would sustain them for forty years. But there is a test involved. They were only to take enough each morning for the day, except for the day before the Sabbath when they were to collect enough for two days. God says to Moses: *In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.*

The congregation will be shaped by the mundane, day-to-day work by which they respond to the divine gift that supplies their lack (16:4). They will be created and re-created in this **daily routine of gathering, learning dependence, trust, and generosity**. They are promised that by observing this routine they will come to know God as the one who freed them from slavery and sustained them each day in the wilderness (16:6, 7, 12).

Is it so different for us? We may not be setting out on a journey across a wilderness but we have been invited on a faith journey with God in Christ. Our journey will also suffer hardships, challenges, disappointments, setbacks, obstacles, and yes, even loss. But just as God followed them in a cloud by day and fire by night, God promises to be with us to the end of our journey.

We too as individuals and as congregations are shaped by the mundane, daily experience of life in all its unpredictability and vulnerability. Today we sit in this sanctuary where for generations our ancestors have sat. They, like us, didn't know where the road would take them, but they journeyed on. They lived out the daily and weekly rhythm of provision, labor, prayer, and rest. They trusted the God who had called them into being through the ministry of that Scot, Thomas Christie in 1832. It has not always been a smooth pathway for the congregation. There have been times of complaining, division, unrest, and near death. But somehow God always answered and the congregation found their way on their journey with God.

Where are we now on this journey, West Flamboro Church? Perhaps we hope for a Moses to lead us on to the promised land. Congregations are consistent in thinking that a new minister will be their Moses. Perhaps! Sometimes! And yes, leadership is critical, but the future life of a congregation is always built on the faith, work and openness of the people. It takes the willingness of the people to be open to the future and not stuck in the past, but willing to be shaped into the congregation God has called them to be.

Like in the desert wastes Israel would be shaped into a people of God through the rhythm of provision, labor, prayer, and rest. Are you willing to be so shaped as we face the uncertainty and challenge of these days we are living through? Soon you will begin a process of soul searching and visioning and decision making that will lead this congregation forward. I believe God will be your anchor and guide through this process, but we must allow the Spirit to lead and support us. You have lots of experience, faith and gifts to find your way to the promised land God has ahead for you. I believe that is true.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus is asked for a sign in order for people to believe he is Messiah. They remind him that their ancestors received the miracle of bread from heaven. What are you going to produce to convince us of your powers? Jesus responds: *Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*

He goes on to make this astounding promise: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

We all start this journey of faith with God and his Christ from different places. Each one of us here today, and those not here but a vital part of this congregation, we all started this journey from a different place. Some were blessed perhaps with parents or grandparents who were living examples of faith and trust in God. Faith in Christ really did anchor your lives and define its rhythm. Others had little of such influence and starting the journey has been full of questions. Who was this Jesus? What does he mean if I trust him, I will have eternal life? What is eternal life anyway? For those unwilling to stay with the questions the journey doesn't really get started. That's where small groups are really helpful. Questions about scripture and faith are shared so that people grow in confidence and are encouraged to continue the journey of discovery.

Where do you stand on this journey? Beginning, not started, stalled somewhere along the way?

I like Paul's encouraging words to the Philippians:

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

**Amen**