

Exodus | What we need is here

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Alison Sampson ~ Exodus 16:2-15

What a time we're having. Our beloved friend and organist has suddenly and unexpectedly died; our dynamic placement minister has suddenly and unexpectedly resigned. We've had too many funerals and too few baptisms; too many leavings and too few celebrations; things are falling apart. I think it's fair to say, many of us feel like we're in some sort of wilderness.

MUC was fresh and exciting for a while. Four congregations banding together to share resources and try something different: a fabulous build, a bustling community centre, a big crowd at worship, and many new friends. Now cold hard reality has set in.

The new build has design choices that make some things difficult; for some of us, it's too far from home. The bustling community centre is largely separate from the church, and building hires press hard against congregational life. As happens with mergers, the big crowd has shrunk to a pre-merger size, and friends old and new have died. The congregation is rapidly aging, multiple staff have left suddenly and sadly, the needs of church and community centre are constantly at odds. We find ourselves shocked, grieving, angry, despondent, frustrated, confused, exhausted—and who knows where we're actually heading?

It was better in the old days, back when Sunday was Sunday and everyone was at church, full of life and vigour and faith. It was better when the pews were full and the youth group overflowed with the post-war baby boom. It was better when there was no Sunday sport, no Sunday shopping, nothing to do but worship. It was better when churches were strong and volunteers were many and ministers stuck around.

These days, our journey seems directionless; we head this way, then that. We move too slowly for some, too fast for others, and almost certainly in the wrong direction. We should worship together, except when we shouldn't; in the auditorium, no, in the chapel. There are too many portfolios and too few people; not enough, no maybe too much prayer. The hymns are unbearable, the power ballads intolerable, the a capella weird and mostly out of tune. The preaching is too orthodox except when it's too wild, and does anyone really call this a sermon?!

And so we grumble: about each other, about the different congregations, about the community centre, about the small number of kids. We grumble about the ways the world has changed, and the impact it's had on the church. We grumble about the costs of merger upon merger, and the many griefs of human longevity. And we grumble about the liturgy and the music and the Council and the ministers, as we grieve all that has been left behind. Perhaps we even feel like the old Israelites in their wanderings: 'If only we had died back then, when we had everything in abundance. Instead here we are, perishing in the wilderness!' (Exodus 16:3).

If the parallels hold true, that is, if we are the people of God in a time of wilderness-wandering, and I think we are, then I suggest that today's story tells us something important. It tells us that God hears our grumbling. And it suggests that God is providing metaphorical manna to satisfy our deepest hunger. To see it, all we need do is look around.

But first, what is manna? The Bible says it was 'like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.' (Exodus 16:31). The word comes from the Hebrew question, 'What is it?' because when the Israelites first saw it, it was a puzzle to them. They soon learned. The flakes come from insects which feed on the sap of tamarisk trees. As they eat, the bugs excrete a cream-coloured substance rich in carbohydrates and sugars. This substance, which is quick to spoil and quick to be harvested by ants, needs to be collected daily. Sound familiar? Some Bedouin on the Sinai Peninsula still gather it and still bake it into bread. And yes, they call it 'manna.'

Some people reject this explanation. They prefer to imagine a supernatural substance falling from the sky. And maybe they prefer to imagine a better church just around the corner, which has perfect leaders and none of the challenges, and which will meet all their desires and needs.

But I like the pragmatic explanation. It tells me that God hears the grumbling of sad tired hungry people who have left the familiar and are wandering in the unknown and are feeling diminished and lost. It tells me that God shows them a surprising gift that is already present and just waiting to be noticed: something which feeds them, and nourishes them, and sustains them day-by-day. And it tells me that God's provision is not simply starvation rations, or dry and tasteless wafers which stick to the roof of your

mouth. Instead, in the words of the Psalmist, it's the bread of angels, sweet as honey, sent in abundance from heaven (Psalm 78:25).

How we interpret Exodus 16 says much about how we expect God to show up. If we think heaven's gifts should drop out of the sky like a brightly packaged bag of Tiptop fortified sliced white, we will be perpetually hungry and disappointed. If we think our leaders should only say things that we are comfortable with, and only point in a direction that we already know, then we will be perpetually aggrieved. And when God fails to answer our prayers in the time and manner and packaging we expect, we will think God is ignoring us, or punishing us, or irrelevant, or cruel, or simply a tired old metaphor well past its use-by date in a sad and aching church.

But if we entertain the possibility that manna is real, and God is listening, and the ordinary folk around us are God's chosen and beloved, we just might discover an intimate listening attentive presence, responsive even to our grumbling in the wilderness. And we might understand that there are heavenly gifts all around just waiting to be noticed: and these gifts are sweet and very, very good.

The wonderful poet and writer Wendell Berry, may he rest in peace, once wrote:

... Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

As we stumble our way through the wilderness, lost, weeping, grumbling, afraid, and yearning for the way things were, let us pray for quiet heart and eye clear. And let us look always for God's good gifts and graces: for what we need is here. Ω

Poem quotes from 'The Wild Geese' by Wendell Berry, from *Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*.