

September 20, 2020

Pastor Dan Hollis

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: the story of Moses and the Israelites has a lot to tell us these days especially. A few weeks ago, Reverend Estelle preached about the *beginning* of Moses' story: the unusual and dangerous circumstances surrounding his birth, and what that story tells us about how God works through unlikely heroes, even us, in times of trouble. *I* preached about Moses and the burning bush, when God asked him to "go out on a limb" to help the oppressed and downtrodden, and what God might be asking *us* to do in a time when the plight of the oppressed has become so *highlighted*.

Today I want to talk about what *we* ask of God, and how it is that *sometimes*, God's *answer* to our prayers... doesn't just drop into our lap. *Sometimes* it involves us working *with* God to see miracles happen.

Today I want to fast-forward in Moses' story. He's been *successful*, he and his supporters: they've freed the Israelites from under the brutal rule of Pharaoh, and they've *escaped* across the Red Sea from the army pursuing them. But their *journey*... still hasn't ended. They're really only in the middle of the story. The part that seems to go on forever. The part that probably felt a lot like this time we're in now, six months into a pandemic, unsure of when we'll make it out the other side.

By this point in the book of Exodus, the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness seeking the Promised Land. The land God had promised them where they could build a home for themselves, safe and free. But they had no map, no road-signs, no landmarks they could identify pointing the way.

They were only able to bring enough food for a month or so, and their whole nation was beginning to starve, with no end in sight.

They cried out to their leaders, Moses and Aaron, railing against the hunger and uncertainty. They were *desperate* for something better, and everything they were facing had left them hopeless.

Sound familiar at all to you? It does to me.

And so, God sought out a way to answer their cries. In our reading we hear God ensure that even out in the lifeless wilderness there would be food for them to gather: quails in the evening for meat, and manna from heaven in the morning. The Bibles in our pews inside translate the ancient word for this flaky substance as "bread," but in a lot of versions they simply transliterate the word as "manna."

Now every once in a while you'll hear somebody use the phrase "manna from heaven" to mean something great that just dropped into your lap:

A coincidence or a miracle where just what you needed shows up, right in your hand. You find twenty bucks on the sidewalk... "manna from heaven!"

The thing about the manna that God provided for the Israelites was that it *didn't* just drop into their laps. It was a little more complicated than that. It's hard to tell from the descriptions in the Bible just what manna was—in Aramaic the word manna simply means "what is it?" Some, like Rev. Estelle, learned in seminary that it might have actually been *bird* poop, perhaps from those quails from earlier. Others speculate it might have been the leavings of *insects*. In the Bible it's described as small like seeds yet flaky like bread... but *whatever* it was it was very nourishing, and filled the body's needs. A true miracle. God caused it to appear as the sun rose and burned off the dew... but it *had* to be collected every morning.

You couldn't stock *up* on it and *store* it, because it would go rotten and wormy surprisingly quickly. You had to collect *exactly* what you needed for the day, and you had a limited time to *do* it each morning before anything still on the ground melted away. You couldn't hire or enslave anyone to collect large amounts of it for storehouses or supermarkets... *you* had to work for it. God set the table, but you had to get your butt to the feast.

And they did. There was a little bit of a learning curve, but eventually the Israelites got the hang of the way that God was answering their cries, and did their best to do their part.

There's an old phrase that *sounds* like it's from the Bible: "God helps those who help themselves." It's an idea that goes back to ancient Greece, but the phrase as we know it comes from England, and it's actually only about as old as First Parish Church.

Eventually Ben Franklin put it in "Poor Richard's Almanac," and ever since people have been quoting it as part of the Bible—which it's not. It also doesn't leave a lot of room for grace, or mercy. What about people who *can't* help themselves? Jesus himself exemplified God reaching out to help the helpless and the hopeless.

But while "God helps those who help themselves" isn't *entirely* true, neither is its opposite. "The Lord will provide" is a Biblical phrase, but we know from experience that God's help isn't *usually* "magic." There *is* room for miracles in this world, but more often than not God answers our prayers in ways we wouldn't expect, right?

A lot of times when a prayer is answered, it's not us doing it, but it's not *just God* either. There's... cooperation to it. We see a perfect example here with the Israelites.

They lament to God, laying out their burdens and their desires and their desperate need for things to get better, and God hears their cries. God provides the opportunity for their prayers to be answered—in this case in the form of manna from heaven—and the Israelites work with God in cooperation to make it happen. To feed their needs, and ensure that things get better for their people.

It's like God provides us the raw materials for answered prayer, and then teaches us how to work with God to make something out of them.

I believe that this example we have from the Israelites can translate to the problems we face today. The impossibilities, the tragedies, the uncertainties, the pain... our pain, others' pain, and even the pain *we* cause... the challenges of this world so often seem too big for us—not just *one* of us, but even *all* of us sometimes—to overcome.

And so we remember the example of the Israelites: we lament to God, God answers with opportunities, and we work in cooperation with God to make it happen.

When we cry out to God, in the face of everything we face right now... God *answers*. God *provides* us with the raw materials and the opportunities to work *with* God to make things better.

I believe that God feels the pain of those who have lost someone to COVID-19, or the violence of racism, or fire, or storm. I believe that God feels the grief of those who lost loved ones no less vividly than *they* do. I believe God feels our fear, and our... hope, and our anger. I believe that God cries out when we do, and that God yearns for a better world and better lives for all of us. A Promised Land for *each* of us. And so when I see the Israelites crying out in the wilderness, desperate and starving, and when I see God reaching out to work with them to make their lot better...

I believe that God reaches out to us too, today, as we cry out in our own desperation... and just as God worked with Israel to ensure they would be fed, I believe that God seeks to work with *us* now to find ways out of our *own* wildernesses... our own dark valleys.

We may not understand or even *know* the *answer* to those prayers yet... but that's why we pray. We pray not to a God that lives far far away and glances at our little blue speck through a telescope every few hundred years... we pray to a God

who yearns to walk with us, who seeks to put shoulders to the plow right alongside us.

The Israelites learned it: you cry out to God, and God provides you with a way to help God make the answer a reality.

So when we pray to God this day and in the face of all the tragedies to come, let us not ask for a magical Band-Aid to erase all hurt from the world in a twinkling of an eye.

Let us pray for the means to help our God make heaven a reality in our lives, and let us look for God's answer! Whatever it may be! And when God drops something in our lap... let's not waste any time. Because we've got a lot of work to do.

Amen.