

I

This Fall, we're reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, often also called the Old Testament. Last week, we listened in as God called to a man named Moses and told him about God's plan to liberate God's people from their oppression in the Land of Egypt, and in that story, we learned that God is neither blind nor deaf to human suffering.

Between where we left off last week and where we pick up this morning, God has performed the greatest miracle in the entire biblical story other than the resurrection of Jesus. God has delivered the Israelites wholesale out of the land of Egypt.

Moses held out his arms, and the waters of the Red Sea parted, and the Israelites walked through on dry ground, with Pharaoh's chariots chasing right behind them. And when every last Israelite was safely through the sea, God caused the sea to fall back in on itself, drowning the Pharaoh and his mighty chariots.

The event came to be known as The Exodus, and it is the greatest miracle in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, it's such a monumental event that it's referenced over and over again in other parts of the bible, particularly the psalms and the prophets.

And so when we come to today's passage, it's been six weeks since that fateful day at the Red Sea. So with that

background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from Exodus 16:1-18.

*The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "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; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."*

*Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

## II

It's been six weeks since God brought God's people, bag and baggage, out of Egypt. It's been six weeks since God has cast horse and rider into the sea.

The people of God had lived as slaves in Egypt for 400 years. 400 years of forced labor. 400 years of bondage. 400 years of oppression. 400 years of literally working themselves to death to build the wealth of Pharaoh's Egypt.

But after just six weeks, the complaining has begun. If only we had stayed behind in the land of Egypt! At least in Egypt we ate from the fleshpots and had our fill of bread. At least in Egypt we knew what to expect. Moses and Aaron, this is all your fault. You have brought us into this wilderness to kill us!

At first read, we might have an urge to shake our heads and cluck our tongues at the people of God. Really? Just six weeks after the greatest miracle of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they're already complaining? After experiencing just six weeks of wilderness after 400 years of brutality, and they already want to go back? At first, we might want to write off the people of God as hopeless or faithless or even evil.

But I submit to you that the people of God in this story are not being evil or mean. They're simply exhibiting the normal human response to anxiety.

At the Red Sea, their entire world had changed before their eyes. At the Red Sea, everything they'd known for the previous 400 years was suddenly and irrevocably changed. Every single person that crossed through those waters knew that the future, whatever it would be, would look nothing like the past.

And anxiety is a natural human response to those kinds of paradigm altering events. Anxiety asks questions like these: How will our basic needs be met? What are the rules and roles now? What are the boundaries? When will we know that we've arrived? What if we don't like it when we get there? Shouldn't we have just stayed put? Was it really all that bad before?

As we say, ultimately, the bible isn't about ancient Egyptian history or human psychology. Ultimately, the bible is about God, and about us, and about our relationships with each other. And so look at how God responds to the people's anxiety.

God says, in Ryan's revised translation of the Hebrew "I'm going to make it rain down bread from heaven for you. And I'm going to cause quail to come up and cover the ground. I'm going to provide for your every need, and there will be enough."

Last week, we said that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is the God who sees and hears and remembers. And this week, we can add to that list. The God of Israel is the God who provides.

God's response to the people's anxiety is not to smite them or chastise them. God's response to the people's anxiety is to provide bread. Not just a slice or a loaf here and there. But God made it rain bread.

God's response to the people's anxiety is to provide meat. Not just a wing here and a drumstick there. But God made quail come up and *cover* the ground. The God of Israel is the God who provides in abundance, and there is enough.

Enough was not a word that was known in Pharaoh's Egypt. In Pharaoh's Egypt, there could never be enough, for there were always more monuments to build, more chariots to manufacture, more storehouses to be filled. In Egypt, Pharaoh was ultimate insatiable consumer, and the economic machinery of Egypt had to run at maximum capacity, no matter what the human cost, seven days a week.

But not so for the God of Israel. For the God of Israel is the ultimate provider, the one who provides in such abundance that one day out of every seven, the people can rest and still eat. The God of Israel is the God who provides enough.

### III

My friend, I imagine that you're feeling at least a little bit anxious this morning. We're all still living through a worldwide event the likes of which no one on the planet had previously experienced within living memory. In

our own nation, we continue to feel the effects of the most bitter and contentious election since the days of the Civil War. The novelty of all of this has long since worn off, and we're all feeling some level of anxiety.

And those are just the things in the headlines. Perhaps you're living through your own kind of paradigm shifting event in your own life, and you know that whatever your future might look like, it will look very different from your past.

If you find yourself wistfully thinking about the old days, even though you know the old days were problematic to say the least, if you find yourself wishing you could go back to the way it was, even if the way it was wasn't great, you're not unfaithful. You're not evil. You're not mean. You're a human experiencing a natural human reaction to anxiety.

And so, my friend, remember how God responded to the people's anxiety. Not with a lightning bolt. Not with chastisement. God is the God who sees. God is the God who hears. God is the God who remembers. God is the God who provides. Not just a little. I am going to make it rain down bread from heaven. I am going to cause quail to come up and cover the ground.

God knows what you need, my friend. God is the God who provides enough.

#### IV

But there's something else which we need to say about God. God is also the God who tests. God said to the people, go out and collect what you need, but no more. And on the sixth day, go out and collect what you need for that day and the next, but no more. Not for nothing, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to pray, Give us this day our *daily* bread.

And so God is the God who tests. Will my people follow my instructions? Will they trust me to be who I say that I am?

And here's how that testing works for you and me, my friend. God asks us to give some of what we have gathered back to God.

Later in the Hebrew Scriptures, God will instruct the people to bring their first fruits of their harvest as an offering to God. In other places later in the Scriptures, God will instruct the people to bring a tithe, that is one-tenth of what they have harvested and give it to support the widows and the orphans and to support the Levites, who were the priests and had no land of their own to harvest.

But the instructions that God gives to God's people to give to God their first fruits, the instructions God gives to God's people to give to God sacrificially, has *nothing* to do with God's need to consume. God is the God who provides. God is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen. The earth is the Lord's, says the

Psalms, the world, and those who live in it. God is the creator and owner of everything, and there's nothing that God wouldn't give you, my friend, including God's only Son. God doesn't want or need your money, my friend. What God wants is your heart, and as Jesus taught his disciples, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

When you give sacrificially, you're saying, "I'm anxious, God. I'm nervous about the future. But I trust that you are the God who provides not just a little, but the God who provides in abundance."

When you give sacrificially, you're saying, "I'm not sure how this is going to work, God, but I trust that if you are the God who can feed 5,000 dinner guests with twelve loaves of bread and two fish, if you're the God that can turn twelve stone jars of water into sweet wine, then yes, God I trust that there is more than enough for today."

When you give sacrificially, you are testifying that there is more to this world than what you can see, hold, and buy.

When you give sacrificially, my friend, you're working your way away from Pharaoh's Egypt and moving toward the kingdom of God.

Now, perhaps I might pause here and define the term, sacrificial giving.

According to the research, Americans are the most generous people on the face of the earth, and we give more dollars to charitable causes than any other nation. And we should be proud of that. We should continue to cultivate a spirit of generosity.

On average, Americans give about 2% of their annual income to charitable causes, and those figures have not changed significantly in the past five decades. For some, 2% of their annual income represents a significant stretch. For others, it represents a drop in the bucket.<sup>1</sup>

But by definition, sacrificial giving is a level of giving that you notice, a level of giving that gets your attention, a level of giving that stretches you and tests you, a level of giving that makes you take a breath and say, "OK, God, I don't know what tomorrow holds, but I'm trusting that you hold tomorrow, and that you've provided enough for today."

Years ago, Amy and I were broke. Actually, we were more than broke, because we had a negative net worth – we owed more than we owned. We hadn't done anything illegal or immoral, we just thought we could work our way out of some of the dumb stuff we'd done with money. And then came a curveball. Well, two curveballs, to be exact, our twin sons. Talk about anxiety and uncertainty about the future!

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<sup>1</sup> "Giving USA 2021: In a year of unprecedented events and challenges, charitable giving reached a record \$471.44 billion in 2020,"

*Lily Family School of Philanthropy at IUPUI*, June 15, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3oPUW4g>, accessed October 9, 2021.

But about that same time, God moved in our life, and we had something of a spiritual awakening when it came to the subject of money and sacrificial giving. And even though we were more than broke, even though we had just gone from a family of two to a family of four overnight, we felt called to begin the practice of tithing – of giving the first tenth of our income to God.

It didn't instantly solve our negative net worth problem. But for reasons passing all understanding, when we began to give sacrificially, our financial anxiety began to ease. When we began to put our money where our mouths were when it came to trusting God, we began to breathe a little more evenly. It wasn't easy, but nowhere in the bible does it say that following Jesus is easy, it only promises that it's worth it.

I share that testimony with you so that you will know that I will never ask you to take on a spiritual discipline like tithing that I am not willing to take on myself.

I know these are anxious times, my friend. I know that the future is uncertain, and we're all longing in some way to "get back to normal." I don't know what the future holds, but my friend, you can know and you can trust the One who holds the future.

## V

And so as we live out our discipleship together here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens, as we

live through these anxious days, may we remember that the God we worship and serve is the God who sees. The God we worship and serve is the God who hears. The God we worship and serve is the God who remembers.

And when we are anxious, when we are afraid, when we complain and grumble, the God we worship and serve does not deal with us according to our sins, but according to the boundless measure of God's steadfast love. The God we worship and serve, the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, is the God who provides us this day our daily bread.

May we respond to God extravagant grace with sacrificial generosity. May we respond to God's abundant provision with abiding trust. And may we respond to God's amazing love with enduring faithfulness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.