

A Sermon for Covenant

Exodus 16:2-15

Covenant Baptist Church, San Antonio

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“If only we had died in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire community to death.” Sound familiar? Last week the lament went like this: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?”

The Israelites are doubting and complaining, again, even *after* the miraculous Red Sea event. When I heard these Israelite stories as a kid, I used to think, man, these people are dumb. When are they going to learn that God will provide? When I re-hear these stories as an adult, I think, man, these people are a lot like me.

You know, I think back to the Parting of the Red Sea—the Egyptians and their chariots breathing down the necks of the Israelites, about to devour them, and the Sea opens up just in the nick of time. That’s a pretty cool story.

But then I think about today’s story, wandering day by day by day in the wilderness. There is no sound of pounding chariots behind you, just the quiet barrenness of the desert, and the growing growl of your empty stomach. You walk and walk and walk, and between steps you wonder when you’ll get to eat next. By contrast, the Parting of the Red Sea was a big event. It took a lot of faith to walk out into the middle of that chaotic Sea, and for the Israelites that was a huge, defining moment.

But if we’re honest, sometimes the day-to-day stuff is harder than the Big Moment stuff. Can I wake up one more day and raise my children, without screwing anything up? Can I survive one more day of this lingering depression? Can I face one more day of mother’s illness? Can I visit dad at the rest home one more time, when he doesn’t even remember who I am anymore? Can I handle one more day of these aches and pains? One more day of not knowing what the future holds? One more day wondering whether the bills will be covered? One more day not knowing if my son or my daughter is ever going to come home again . . . Can I make it one more day?

Sometimes we have what is popularly known as a crisis of faith, some event in our lives that spirals us into places of deep questioning. Other times, it is the mere, mundane daily grind that nearly kills us. The slow suffocation of our spirits. Like the Alzheimer’s of faith, we grow weary, forgetful, and confused. We can’t understand what’s happening, and we can no longer remember our own stories of redemption. Sometimes it gets so bad that we look upon friendly, familiar faces with unseeing eyes, forgetting the community who has carried us this far and is still there to walk the rest of the way with us. We try to do the work alone, face each day alone, and it feels like we’re losing our faith all alone.

At times like that, we’d almost volunteer to take on a whole host of Egyptian chariots—perhaps something big would make us feel alive again. But on second thought, we’re too tired to find any armies to fight. So we just keep plodding along—feet sandy from the desert ground, throats

parched, stomachs growling, joints aching. Our fondest daydream is of a large bed with cozy pillows where we could sleep the year away. “Moses, Moses, if only we had died in Egypt. Pots of meat. Food that kept us full. A bed at night. Moses, Moses, why did you bring us out here to starve?”

Of course, you already know what happened for the Israelites. God rained down bread from heaven. He sent quail in the night, and manna in the morning. Which sounds awesome, until you stop and think about it. If you ask me, once you’ve eaten the same exact thing for days on end, it pretty much quits feeling like a miracle. In fact, it reminds me of when I was a resident chaplain on Baylor’s campus, and Nate and I could eat the cafeteria food for free. But let me tell you, after one year of eating cafeteria food for free, we quit being thankful. By our second year of cafeteria food, we were downright grumpy about it.

The Parting of the Red Sea? Now that’s the kind of miracle we’re all secretly craving. Something big and exciting, an *event* we are sure to see and appreciate. The kind of miracles that happen on a daily basis? Not only do we overlook them, sometimes we get downright sick of ‘em.

But the daily-ness of miracles is no kind of mistake on God’s part. God was intentional about the daily-ness of the manna provision. If you remember, God rigged it, such that the Israelites couldn’t hoard a single crumb. Leftover manna would rot the very next day, meaning they had to trust God anew every single morning.

God’s answer to the Israelite’s struggle of faith was not to show up in some profound and splendid way. God’s answer was to provide for them on a mere daily basis. Any attempt at hoarding for the sake of future security would ultimately fail. This was not a mountain top experience that could last them for months to come; this was not a “camp high” to see them through the summer. God was training them in the daily disciplines of keeping the faith. I suspect God knew that daily discipline was the only thing that would get them clear through the desert and into the Promised Land.

Yeah, sure, God knew there would be days when they’d gather manna for the hundredth time and they’d nearly gag on the overly-familiar taste. But you see, the monotony of the miracle had something to teach them. You have to keep your eyes open and your heart tuned to the details and your soul appreciative if you’re going to see God in the nooks and cranny’s where the Spirit likes to dwell. There *is* sustenance there, in God’s tiny daily provisions, but if we’re fixated on finding something fabulous, we just might starve our spirits to death.

Though it surely came to feel like a nuisance to the Israelites, God was very deliberate about the business of manna. On the seventh day of the week, the manna stopped, because that was the Sabbath, thus the daily rhythm was defined by a larger weekly rhythm. This too, is a key piece of God’s provision. There would be no gathering, no working on the Sabbath day, yet there would always be enough to eat. Notice this seventh-day-manna-stops thing happens *before* God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. That means the Sabbath is far *more* than a command. Sabbath runs down deep—it is a part of God’s created order. It’s a creational reality, a life reality—not a rule, not a regulation, not a suggestion.

And Sabbath is not first about worship; it's about rest. It is a *provision* God is making *for* the people—not something they do for God, but something God does for them. For people who had based their identity on making bricks for the Pharaoh, day after day after day, the idea that they could rest and still eat too was revolutionary.

They weren't making bricks anymore, but sometimes they even got wrapped up enough in gathering manna, they were tempted to forget it was *God* who provided. Then Sabbath would roll around again, like it always does, and the manna wouldn't show. Despite months of the same pattern, some of the mothers would still get a little knot of anxiety in their stomachs, wondering if they'd be able to keep the children fed. Would the manna come back? Experience said yes, but the temptation to doubt was always there. God had designed it so that they couldn't hoard and save, and on Sabbath mornings, that made them nervous. But then, with the slow unfolding of a rest-filled day, the anxiety would eventually give way to wonder—which is what Sabbath is about, and by Monday, there was new room in their souls for gratitude.

When you and I practice Sabbath, it helps us slowly relax our hoarding grasp—whether it be a grasp on time, on possessions, on control. Stopping your work to remember that it is not up to you to keep the world running, to remind yourself that God's provision is not dependent on your productivity. Of course, the anxiety of stopping runs deep, such that you feel this restless tension nearly every time Sabbath rolls around. Sometimes the wave of peace that follows on the heels' of anxiety hits you hard and hits you early, and you spend most of Sabbath soaking in the goodness of God, and the reality of your identity as His Beloved. You are no longer Pharaoh's slave, or anybody's slave, and *the ability to rest* makes that all the more clear. Other days, the peace comes slow and gentle like, such that you barely notice it ever came. You spend much of the Sabbath day either bored or worried about Monday. It's not until you get up for work Monday morning that you feel the slight adjustment in your soul, and despite the grind ahead of you, you surprise yourself by smiling. Your soul *did* take a deep breath the day before, and you weren't even conscious of it. Fresh oxygen pumps through your veins, and you know you have a little bit of life inside of you after all. For just a second, you open your eyes a little wider, and without warning the wilderness in front of you takes on fresh hues, the shades of God's glory. The vision doesn't last long, but it lingers long enough that your breakfast manna tastes of honey, and God seems near again, at least near enough for you to keep believing, and the Promised Land seems like more than just a far-off dream.

I hope today is Sabbath for you. It was meant to be that. Life is hectic, I know that, and so does God, of course, and our society is pretty adept at making its own schedule over and against God's created order. But if you practice, you can uncover common gifts, like daily bread and weekly Sabbath. They're just waiting there, to be found and to be embraced. So may you find them. Amen.