

Exodus 16: 2-15 (September 20, 2020)

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²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The 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.” ⁴Then 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. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So 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, ⁷and 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?” ⁸And 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. ⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“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.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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.

Historical Context

Exodus 16 is the second stage of Israel’s wilderness journey, following the dramatic defeat of Pharaoh’s army at the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14-15). Departing from the oasis at Elim (Exodus 15:27), Israel arrives at the “Desert of Sin” on the way to Sinai. Thus, Exodus 16 sits in that uncomfortable space between departure and destination—or in this case, between liberation and covenant. Verse 1 indicates that these events occurred a month after Israel’s departure from Egypt. Long journeys in adverse conditions often bring out the worst in people.

Theme: God is Present

The complaining is loud and clear in this Exodus passage. For us as readers, it is tempting to adopt the position of story outsider and treat the complaining as whiners, condemning the Israelites as faithless. Although no one likes listening to complaint, to listen to a complaint involves seeing the world from another’s position and hearing a call to act. Thus, to condemn the Israelites for complaining in Exodus 16 would be to introduce a judgment that the text itself does not make, sending the message that complaint has no place in life with God.

This, of course, is not true. The laments in the Book of Psalms give voice to the human experience of abandonment, suffering, fear, and danger. The laments call upon God to see, arise,

and act. At its core, complaint is a turning *to* God -- not away -- trusting that God does not ignore, dismiss or punish those who call out in fear, anger, suffering, and need.

In Exodus 16, the Israelites are beginning their second month of wilderness walking (16:1) following their deliverance from Egypt. The dangers of the wilderness are real. They are no longer part of the system of labor that fed them in the past. They cannot supply their own needs. They *are* hungry. Their situation is dire and there is no visible way out.

The complaint that there is no food, the fear of the present, and the longing to be back in an earlier time are not constrained to the pages of Exodus. The situation is the same for the world's poor today, and they are joined by increasing numbers of people losing homes, jobs, health care, pensions, dignity, property, and savings in the wake of global economic turbulence.

Exodus 16 offers the assurance that the wilderness of want is not a God-forsaken time or place. As Moses instructs Aaron to say to the Israelites: "Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining" (16:9).

God *hears* the complaining of the Israelites. God *recognizes* not only their need for sustenance -- daily bread -- but their desire for a life beyond scarcity -- meat. God *responds* by sending quail for meat and manna for bread.

God is near and listening to those whom we might be tempted to call faithless: those who complain to God because they are hungry, anxious, dislocated, in unfamiliar territory and without a clear plan for the future. There God is present. For them the glory of the LORD is revealed in daily bread...and meat.