

Thanksgiving in a Time of Fear and Austerity

Exodus 16:1-18; John 6:51

Today is thanksgiving. But given the events of the past few weeks, I am finding it difficult to be thankful. When looking at the current state of things, the call to be thankful today, is one I'm struggling to actually hear. We have global disasters hitting some of the most vulnerable populations in the world, a refugee crisis that has led to the highest number of refugee claimants in history, another mass shooting in the United States which will likely not result in stronger gun regulations, and an aggressive and global austerity campaign - which we are now feeling here in Manitoba - that seems to be working at ensuring that more people are left without the means to live a good life. Famine in Ethiopia. Devastation in Puerto Rico. Over 50 dead in Las Vegas. More and more health care cuts in Manitoba. This thanksgiving, is coming at a time where it's easier to see fear and austerity at play than anything truly calling for our praise. Thanksgiving in a time of fear and austerity - this is difficult ground to navigate.

But this is where we stand - on thanksgiving day hearing the story of God reigning down bread onto a broken and starved Israel. Like the people of Israel, we find ourselves tempted to shout complaints to the Lord, proclaiming that the world we inhabit is not properly providing for us all. It may feel like where we stand there is nothing calling for our thanks. But like with the Israelites, God's response to us draws us into a life of abundance. God actively opens our eyes to the ways in which God's provisions for the world can still be seen, felt, and tasted. Our story for today calls us to look for and participate in the manna falling from heaven in this time of fear and austerity. This is something I believe calls for our thanks - as hard as that may seem.

Exodus 16:1-18 is a passage that moves in a clear direction. It begins with the complaints of Israel, which is then followed by the provisions given by God, and then instructions on how to care for these provisions.

Israel complains. God responds. And then God instructs the people on how to live.

The passage begins with the complaints of Israel. The people of God had recently been freed from the hands of the Pharaoh and have departed from the bounty of Elim - a land with a good source of food and water. They now find themselves in the wilderness on the way to Sinai and fear that they will not have enough to survive. Where is the food they will eat? Where is the water they will drink? Given all the miraculous deeds the Lord had accomplished on behalf of Israel the people would have been right to assume that God would endlessly provide for them. That they were now hungry and thirsty hit them hard and they complain.

For the first time in the Exodus story we see a real and legitimate struggle between the people of Israel and Yahweh. Up until this point the struggle had been between God and the Pharaohs. Now the struggle is between God and God's own people. Hungry and deprived the people shout in anger to God. Who is it that we have committed to? And why does it seem and feel like we have been abandoned? The complaints intensify to the point where the people start longing for their previous life under threat from Pharaoh. In verse 3 they tell Moses and Aaron "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." For two months they had been wandering the wilderness without the proper provisions needed to survive. The threat of death was legitimate and real. This is a people overcome by a fear arising out of their deprived situation. And they, like most of us would, complain. Even the Pharaohs were able to provide better for us!

The Lord's response to these complaints is so quick and clear it's almost comical. Oh you're hungry? Okay "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day." There, food. You now have it. God hears the complaints of the people and responds, in this instance, in a direct and immediate fashion.

Of course, this is not always the case in our scriptures. There are times where God does not act in this way - a point we need to always remember. But God does so here, in part because God wants the people to know that even in our most forsaken moments, God's presence can be seen, felt, and tasted. Manna rains down from heaven onto a broken and starved Israel. This is one of the beautiful images received in this text.

But this is only part of what God is doing here. That God meets us in our forsakenness is only part of the message being communicated in this text. Manna is also given as a test for Israel. It is given by God to see whether Israel could properly live in a way that provides for the whole congregation. They are to receive it in a specific way - collecting only what is needed and not an ounce more so that all may receive enough for the day. Will they actually follow the instructions given? Will the people gather only what is enough for that day?

A more complete answer to these questions come later in the story than what was heard today - and it's not great. It appears, and we receive glimpses of this already in our text, that the people harvest the manna thinking about the days to come. They take more than what is needed for the day such that they may have enough for the next day. The result is that some of the people received more manna than others. There was only enough manna provided for everyone to receive enough for that day. To take for the coming days would mean others would not receive enough for that day.

But again here, God acts in such a way to provide for all. In spite of the greed of some in the congregation God provides food for everyone. As we hear in verse 18, "those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage." God instructs the people to take only what is needed for the day so that all may receive an equal portion. Some disobey, taking matter into their own hands storing for future days at the expense of others. Some take more than what is theirs

to take, and this has direct consequences for others, as some now have less. Things do not play out equally.

Nevertheless God still provides. The gift of manna is not one received through skill, perseverance, or cunning intuition. It is not a gift received through merit or even hard work. And this is a key message of the text. God does not provide according to achievement, but to need. Manna is not something we earn or fail to earn. It is something graciously given in a time of need. It is something that calls for thanks.

And so we find here a God who is actively drawing people into a life of abundance. But we also find a people failing to truly see the beauty and meaning behind this abundance. The fear of the situation drives some to fail the test God lays out for them. Some hoard at the expense of others.

But there still much to be thankful for here. For our God is one actively working to provide for the needs of the world. And in doing so we become a people called to trust that God will provide as we find ourselves drawn into this life of abundance together. We are people called to live in this world witnessing to the abundant workings of the Lord. And we are to participate alongside the Lord in the work of providing for the needs of the world. The point here is not just that God provides. It's that in providing for us, God wants us to better provide for those around us. In providing for us, God desires us to become a people providing for the world. If our acts of thanksgiving do not extend beyond our own wants and needs, we have failed to truly see the manna raining down from heaven today. Instead we only see the fears and concerns of the coming days.

This is the struggle we encounter on thanksgiving in this time of fear and austerity. On the one hand we are called to see the abundance of God working in the world. On the other we see a world inhabited by a people failing to provide for all. Where is the manna falling from heaven in a world caught up by global disasters, wars that force people to flee, and

governments concerned more with a balanced budget than actually providing for its people? How can we live such that “those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage”?

Where can we find the manna raining down from heaven and drawing out our thanksgiving? My hope for this morning is that reading this story today, incites in us a greater desire to engage with those already doing good work caring for the world. Where is there manna falling from heaven and calling for our praise? This is a question we have answered well in the past. I hope we will answer well again in the days to come.

Given our current circumstances, I believe there are three specific ways which we can indeed begin looking for the manna in our midst. In this time of fear and austerity there are things we as a congregation can begin, or continue to do. First, it is important for us to be listening to and learning from development and settlement workers responding to the variety of global disasters currently occurring and then discerning how best to respond as a church. How can we as a congregation continue engaging in and supporting the work being done by institutions like Mennonite Central Committee and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank? Now of course, these are two places we are already heavily invested in. But let's not take them for granted either. Place like these have in the past been good avenues for us to locate the manna spreading across the world. My hope is that they continue to be that for us as we move forward together.

Second, we should engage with those people already actively pushing back against the ways in which austerity measures continue to be promoted by the powers that be. We should be listening to and learning from policy analysts who have devoted their lives to the study of economics such that we may develop a greater appreciation for the impacts drastic cuts to social programming and public services have on those in need. In doing so we may better identify the appropriate ways in which we, as a church, can assist in this work. Now let me be clear, this is not a call for us to become policy analysts - that is not the

responsibility of the church in any way. Our responsibility is to talk with those knowledgeable in these areas and then identify where there is manna (if there is any) that is truly feeding people and then in turn helping it to grow. I believe there is manna to be found in the work of places like the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg. My hope is that we may properly identify and respond to this manna.

Thirdly, and probably most importantly, to be thankful in this time of fear and austerity requires us to witness to a life that at every turn refuses to succumb to the fears being thrust into our sights. As a people of God, it is our task to look beyond our fears to see the hope, goodness, and light that is always breaking through. This is not a denial of the legitimacy, or the realness of our fears. This is not a call to always look on the bright side of life. The people of Israel had good reason to complain to the Lord. We, at times, have good reason to do so as well. But it is a call to endlessly look for and identify the ways in which God is at work addressing the needs of the world. We are to give witness to a life in which manna is actively cutting through the fears of the world.

This is my prayer for us today. That we may be a people receiving the manna of God in the way God intends. In all likelihood, we each have legitimate reasons to be fearful, frustrated, and even angry with God. My hope is that these fears, frustrations, and anger never have final say on how we are to live. Yes, there are times where we are a forsaken and broken people. But our God, is a God who provides, not according to achievement, but to need. This I believe, is something that draws our thanks. Thanks be to God. Amen.