

“Manna Everywhere”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, September 20, 2020

Exodus 16 and Psalm 105

Jesus knows us well. He knows that we often worry. He knows when we were overwhelmed. He knows how we question ourselves, and the interior dialogue that runs non stop when we lose our way – the questions that come and deflate our courage, that take away our sense of purpose. “Are we good enough? Are we doing the right thing? Are we being enough?” He knows how we sometimes became so lost in our doubting that we can’t find God. To borrow some of the terminology from our Exodus passage today, he knows our complaints, he hears our grumbling. And to all of our worries, Jesus will say, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God ... and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Mt 6:31-33)

The Israelites weren’t immune from this worrying. They were complaining, asking “What will we eat?” They had been led out from Egypt where they had pots full of cooked meat to fill their bellies, and bread in abundance. And now they are in the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai, and there is nothing to eat. And they complain, “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.” (Ex. 16:3) And God hears the complaints. Four times in the passage we are told that “the Lord has heard the complaining.” Clearly, God is listening.

Quails arrive in abundance. And then the manna - this edible thin fragile coating of substance that showed up when the dew dried off the land. And God said that there would be manna each and every morning, except on the Sabbath. And to make up for that, there would be twice as much manna on the day before so that a portion could be ‘saved’ for the Sabbath. And Exodus tells us that for 40 years, that manna showed up every single time.

In their wilderness living, the Israelites found themselves in a very different environment. While they still had family and friends around them, all else was gone. Gone were the rooms they had slept in all those years in Egypt; gone were the kitchen fires they had cooked over, the familiar paths they took in their daily walks. Now all they could see was the desert for miles.

Like the Israelites and their memories of the flesh pots and bread, we too miss what we’ve lost during this pandemic. Gone are the freedoms of gathering together with as many people as we want; gone is the sharing and the laughing and the being close to each other; gone are the ways we shopped, went to school, worked, travelled, celebrated weddings and gathered for funerals. Can God hear our lament through our face masks and face shields? Does God hear our prayer? Does God hear our complaint? Where is *our* manna?

The psalm urges us to ‘seek God’s presence continually’. If I could do this, I might get a glimpse of that daily manna at my feet. For where there’s manna, there’s God; where there’s God, there’s manna.

I need to let go of my attention to the material things in my world and grasp the spiritual. It’s hard work to let go of the material details that fill our days, whether driven by work, family, or social media. These behaviours of tending to the material, rather than the spiritual, become patterns that are entrenched in the rhythm of our days and our nights. How do we disengage from the material grip found in our lives, in our imaginations?

St. Benedict was born in 480, in the province of Nursia, in Italy. He would in time form a monastic community that would thrive under a ‘rule’ he wrote for living in community. Fifteen hundred years later and the Rule of St. Benedict is still finding its way into communities of faith and into people’s lives. The Rule of Benedict continues to carve a path through whatever history has conjured up over 1500 years – wars, the collapse of regimes and kingdoms, changing times. It is based on an egalitarian premise where there is no hierarchy, only the responsibility to live by the Rule in community. In Chapter 2 of the Rule, St. Benedict is concerned with the qualities of the Abbot, the ‘leader’ of the monastery. Benedict writes, “They must not show too great a concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world ... they are to remember what is written: “Seek first the reign and justice of God, and all these things will be given you as well (Matt. 6:33).” St. Benedict is very clear –strive for the spiritual things in life, not the material.

Sister Joan Chittister reflects further on Benedict’s directive to keep to the spiritual: “The number of families who have succumbed to the notion that giving their children everything that one can buy assures their happiness need this insight from monastic spirituality. The number of business people who have put their entire lives into developing their businesses instead of their quality of life need this insight from monastic spirituality. The number of young people who have learned to believe that success depends on having it all may need this monastic lesson in life. The Rule of Benedict teaches us that nothing ... is worth the loss of ... the spiritual things in life.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the last several months, I have come to know someone in our community of Stouffville who is very much a leader. She has and continues to inspire so many of us to become more physically fit and to remember that there is no judgement and her signature catch phrase, ‘You do you’. Antonietta Botticelli is the owner and face of ‘Abotti with Antonietta.’ She has been offering half hour low-impact exercises to dance music for a while here in Stouffville. When Covid hit, she moved to online classes and she offered complimentary classes to hundreds of us for the last six months. Testimonies on her Facebook page share the delight and encouragement so many have received from her non-judgmental, fun, healthy low-impact classes. She was even featured on City TV’s Breakfast Television this summer.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020), 49.

Antonietta posted a live video on Friday night which I watched. Antonietta said I could share her words. She told us how she has been struggling with what she's doing. I didn't know she had quit her corporate job last May to pursue her dream of helping others to reach better health goals. She is questioning what she's doing. "Am I doing enough?" "Am I doing the right thing?" It was all wearing her down, and she shared her struggle of being in a dark place. This from a non-stop pint-sized ball of energy that has lifted up hundreds of us.

Then she shared with us the mail she had received that day. A hand made card, which thanked her for 'pulling people out of dark places. I thank God for you.' Antonietta, filled with emotion, could hear God saying to her – "Listen Antonietta, I've given you a gift. You're doing it right. Keep going. I'm going to bless you with building a community of no judgement, love and laughter." And all I could see was the manna fluttering to the ground all around her. And there were buckets of it – I could see it in her smile, her tears, her restored confidence.

The psalm tells us that God will never forget God's promise, not in thousands of years, not over thousands of generations. God listens. God keeps a *daily* promise, not a 'every once in a while' promise. Every day God provides the manna you need. Every day, when your feet hit the floor, that manna is there on the ground, waiting for you – in the wilderness of your life, in the certain times of your life, in the best times of your life, in the worst times of your life.

But you need to learn to look for it. See it. Recognize it. Scoop it up and taste it. Because it's always there. Every day.

Julie Howard wrote these words in her hymn, 'In the Quiet Curve of Evening'.

In the mystery of my hungers,  
In the silence of my rooms,  
In the cloud of my unknowing,  
You are there.

In the empty cave of grieving,  
In the desert of my dreams,  
In the tunnel of my sorrow,  
You are there.

You are there.  
You are there.  
You are there.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Howard, *In The Quiet Curve of Evening*, Words and Music by Julie Howard, 1993. Voices United Hymnal, #278.