

“Bread of Heaven, Bread of Earth”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 16:2-15
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on September 24, 2017

The bread from heaven came up from the earth with the morning dew. It was simple and sweet. It was miracle and magic. It was practical and persistent, every day faithful.

It was mysteriously absent on the Sabbath day and maggot-filled should you try to hoard it. It was sustenance. It was answered prayer. It was God’s response to their complaint.

It was sacred meal; it was common bread. It was communal glue. It must be gathered. It could not be stored.

Manna. In Hebrew, the word *manna* sounds like the phrase, “What is it?” Their miracle, their wonder bread—they named it, “What is it?”

I wonder, how many small daily graces appear at our feet, and we do not recognize them? “What is that?” we say to the gifts, and we forget to thank them for arriving. We forget to identify their worth, call them heaven-sent. Did the Israelites know their prayers were being answered or were they waiting around for steak and potatoes with a glass of Chardonnay?

I wonder, must a gift be flashy to be supernatural? Can something natural—from nature—also be from God?

When was the last time you turned to thank the sun for shining, the moon for beaming, or the waves for splashing? When last did you press pause on complaint and receive with joy what has already been given?

Even in the dry and desolate wilderness of your sorrow, has there not been bread every morning, a quail or its equivalent at night? Despite the aching loneliness, have you really been alone?

The daily gifts do not obliterate one’s need to grieve, to rage, or to wail, but the daily gifts challenge any foregone conclusion that God has forgotten.

God has not forgotten.

You only have to look as far as the food at your feet or the friends at your table to know this haunting wilderness truth—there really is no end to God’s mercy even in your longest wanderings and in the face of your most ravenous hunger.

There will always be meat for you, bread for you, flakes of hope for you to gather, gather, gather. Don’t expect it to last more than a day. Tomorrow you must gather again. But that is the nature of hope. Hope is small. Hope is fleeting. Hope is new every morning.

If you try to stockpile enough hope to last you awhile, it probably won't work. But if you look for just a daily dose—a daily dose only—you will not be disappointed. You will find what you need for today, and bread by bread, you will find your way through the harshest of landscapes and loneliest of terrains. You will come to know and to believe God is with you.

God is with us. Immanuel. Bread of life, broken for you. What is it, this mystery? Our daily bread, our daily Christ? I have so many questions. Don't you?

Maybe *What Is It?* is the perfect name, just the right name for that which exceeds comprehension. Maybe instead of saying, "Please pass the bread," then devouring it, we ought to take that loaf in our two hands and stare at it awhile. What is it? Mere cooked dough? Or a gift from heaven? Mere meal or symbol of the resurrected Christ? Mere symbol or Christ's real presence? Mere spiritual food or tangible physical sustenance? Do we even know?

Maybe the Israelites weren't being skeptical or ungrateful or suspicious when they picked up their dinner from the ground and said to each other, "What is it?" Maybe they knew better than to rush to conclusions by naming and identifying and labeling. Maybe by asking questions they were remembering this was God's food and it did not belong to them to conquer and control with a definition of their own making. They did not take it for granted that they knew what was going on or what God was up to. Instead, they thought it best to ASK and learn.

Moments before they were complaining, complaining, complaining, so certain it would have been better to remain slaves in Egypt than to starve in the desert. But then this unrecognizable gift appears at their feet and for just a moment they stop being know-it-alls and they return to childlike wonder. "What? Why? How? Wow! Do it again! Do it again!"

In light of God's manna and quail, such ordinary grace, I encourage you to revisit your life's blessings with a new curiosity and with a child's bright inquisitiveness. Ask yourself, have I *really* paid attention? Then ask questions of your blessings. Say to them, "What are you, really? Why are you here? What have you been hoping to tell me about God? Do you have a message for me that I haven't yet heard? Are you my little bit of evidence that God is with me? Have I thanked you for showing up right when I needed you?"

Give us this day our daily bread. How many times have we prayed that prayer but not meant it at all? "Give us a life-supply of bread right now!" would be more true to the way we worry and fret. We are rarely satisfied with the gifts of today. At least, I'm not. I need guarantees for tomorrow! And for next year! And the next!

It's not that our future planning is wrong, necessarily, but it sure can shut out gratitude, and without gratitude, there really can't be joy.

Give us this day, our daily bread. Thank you, God, for yesterday's bread and yesterday's faithfulness.

Thank you for *today*. Help me to slow down and see your daily gifts whether or not I know how to name them. Give me *this day* to enjoy my bread. You know how often I overlook this day thinking about other days behind and before me. But I want to know you, see you, taste you, touch you, *this day*. It's the only day in which I can truly be alive.

Help me to be with you as you are always with me. So often I'm not really here. I don't even taste the bread. My thoughts and feelings are elsewhere. I'm so distracted. I didn't notice you were here, O God. Surprise me into paying attention again. Stop me in my tracks with wildflowers or with food, with a sunset or a child's hug—just do something to make me remember you are good and that you haven't left me, even if I have left you.

O Giver of my daily bread, what is this love you have given me? Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

O Manna Provider, you know I am a grumpy and gripe-y recipient of your gifts, but right now, in this moment, I choose to be awed. I choose wonder. I choose curiosity. I choose gratitude.

For a moment I will stop keeping record of all the times I think you got it wrong—the list is long. Today I pull out the list of all that is beautiful and good, and I remember there is so much here I could never possibly name it all.

What is it you have done for us, O God? Is it more than we know? More than we realize? More than we've even begun to name? The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy.

Today I choose to gather your gifts into my basket, notice them, savor them, say, "Thank you." O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. God's steadfast love endures forever. You have given us this day our daily bread. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Amen.