

Exodus 16:1-5, 9-12
A Bread to Build
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To the best of his knowledge, all that Brooks Hadlan could recall was life behind bars. The limestone walls that surrounded him had become his home. So when he received his parole letter, Brooks Hadlan was disoriented by the new reality he faced. Upon his release, Brooks finds himself walking the streets in a state of confusion and disorientation. You see, objectively Brooks was free. He had an apartment, a job bagging groceries. He could go to the park and feed the birds whenever he wanted. But inside he was still imprisoned. This, of course, is from the beloved film *The Shawshank Redemption*, and the elderly character Brooks Hadlan was not ready to go through the difficult task of learning something new, living an unrestrained, unconfined, unincarcerated life.

True freedom is not just a present circumstance; real freedom is the ability to live freely. And this is what the Israelites are invited to discover in this next stage, and it's the fifth Marker in their journey from slavery in Egypt into the promise of God's love: a bread to build.

So if you would, open up your Bibles to Exodus 16. There, we'll be reading verses 1-5 and 9-12. And if you are able, would you please stand in honor of the reading of God's Word?

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily...."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, 'Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.'" And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

Among the most exciting ministries we are able to offer as a congregation is what we provide our children. Godly Play is the creative use of toys to communicate God's stories through interaction and imagination. One of their favorites is the Exodus story, because that involves the Desert Box.

Desert stories begin: "The desert is a dangerous place. There's no water or food there. You don't go into the desert unless you absolutely have to." I was reflecting upon this phrase and I realized, this has profound implications for us, as well, in how we understand our journey of freedom in Christ. Something happens in the desert, and it's not just a sunburn. The desert is where we actually learn what it means to live freely in God's love and provision.

If you remember at the beginning of our text, the people of Israel, after being released from slavery in Egypt, came to a place called Elim (*A-Leem*). In the closing verses of chapter 15, we learn that Elim is sort of like Palm Springs. There were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. They even had a Starbucks. The people must be thinking: "Yes, we've made it, this is beautiful." But almost as soon as they arrive, Moses and Aaron say to them, "Folks, pull up the tent pegs, we're going into the wilderness." They're going into the desert, and the desert is a dangerous place.

Why would they do that? Why after rescuing them and leading them to this nice spot, Elim, would God have Moses take his people back into the desert? What purpose does this wilderness serve? It's in the wilderness that we learn what it means to live freely, trusting in God.

You see, Elim is that deep sigh of relief when they realize they're no longer in Egypt. The desert is where they go to answer the question, "So now what?" Elim is finally discovering that career that awakens your passion and gets you going in the morning, and the wilderness is figuring out how to actually become a teacher, nurse, sales person and make it support your family. Elim is reaching retirement age and saying goodbye to your job, what comes next is learning how to live into the new circumstance of your life, making sense of the freedom you now have.

The wilderness is a dangerous place, but it is also a place where we learn to live closely to God, trusting that there is a reason for this wilderness, and its purpose is ultimately to bless us.

So how does God do it? How does God use the wilderness to lead us to freedom?

Forty-five days after Moses and Aaron led the people out of Elim, the people begin to grumble and complain. They say to Moses and Aaron, **you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.** Why doesn't God just give Moses another great miracle to rekindle their hope like He did with the Red Sea?

This is where we learn our first lesson about living into our freedom: in the wilderness, we see God's extraordinary provision in ordinary things.

The problem with allowing our faith to rest on God's next miracle (which, by its very definition, suggests that miracles are uncommon or extraordinary) is that we miss the common, very ordinary ways in which God sustains and provides for us.

My Old Testament professor in seminary, a man by the name of Terry Fretheim, writes: "If the only place we ever look for God is on the mountain-top or in the deep-sea we will miss the ordinary things in which God reveals his blessings to us over and over again. The danger of this is that when we no longer see the big miracles, it's possible for us to believe that God has left us."

Brian is an oncologist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and he tells a story of a young male patient of his: A man in his early 20's, college football player, now battling an extremely rare form of colon cancer. For the first few days, every night, on multiple occasions, this young man would ring up the doctor. "Doc, I think it's _____. Can you come down and run a test on my blood?" The next night at 3am, "Doc, can you run this test? I'm pretty sure it's this." This continued for a few days and finally Jim realized what was going on. The young man was looking for the breakthrough treatment that would answer his questions because he was afraid to die. So on his next visit, after hearing what this young man thought would help, Jim knelt beside his bed and asked: "Are you listening to that still small voice that's trying to get your attention?" You see, the young man was looking for the Hail Mary treatment because he was afraid to face the uncertainty of his future. Jim came to him and said, "The next time you hear that still small voice, say, 'What is it?' because God is trying to get your attention."

You see, the greatest danger of the wilderness is not the desolation, not the harsh conditions which surround us. I think the greatest danger of being in the wilderness is failing to recognize God's presence there with us.

After hearing the grumbling, the murmuring, the backbiting of the Israelites, God tells Moses, "**I am about to rain bread from heaven for you.**" Every day, go out and gather enough for today, except on the sixth day, that day you'll gather a double portion. And when the people saw it, they said, "What is it?" The literal Hebrew transliteration is *man hu*, we get the word manna from this. What is it? It's the same thing I often hear when I make dinner at home...*man hu*... what is it?

In the wilderness, Israel was given grace in the manna, and a promise that every day, it would be there. Manna, this sweet tasting bread that is really a foretaste of the Promised Land, which is described as the land flowing with milk and honey. Manna was this innocuous, very ordinary thing. In fact, in the book of Numbers, we get a plausible explanation as to where manna actually came from—Numbers 11, if you want to look it up. But it's this desert bread, gathered, shared, enjoyed, not hoarded, that was a marker that God was continuing to lead them in their freedom. It was a bread to build their new identity.

Do you notice what happens when Israel tries to take matters into their own hands, when manna ceases to be something they receive, and becomes something they take? It spoils.

Fearing that the manna won't be there in the morning, they hold a portion back, failing to enjoy what was given for today. They are still living with an Egypt mindset, one of scarcity and withholding. Learning to live freely in the wilderness means learning to believe that you are a beloved daughter or son of the heavenly Father who will be given everything you need.

I recently had a very special moment with a person who has been attending this church for a while. He and I have had a chance to talk about faith and life, and reflect together on what God is doing in his life. On numerous occasions, he has said to me, "It didn't really make sense to me when I was younger. My life was consumed with all sorts of unanswerable questions." You see, he, too, is in a wilderness journey, a journey of discovering his life in Christ. Last week, we were sitting at the dining room table and he asked the question, "What do I have to do to be saved?" I shared with him Paul's words from Ephesians 2:8 that say for it is by grace that we are saved through faith, and not by works lest any of us should boast. Salvation is not something we gather, not something we hoard, not something we can take. It only ever comes to us when we receive it. Grace for today, just enough, no more and no less.

Guy walks into a Waffle House somewhere in South Carolina... (not a joke)... where he orders a waffle accompanied by scrambled eggs and bacon. When the waitress brought the order to his table, there was this strange white goop on his plate alongside his waffle and eggs. "Ma'am what is this?" "Grits." "What's a grit?" "You don't order just one." "But I didn't order any." "Honey," she replied, "you don't order grits, they just come!"

Did God withhold or punish the Israelites for holding back some of the manna? Of course not. There it was the next day, a gift for them. And they got it wrong over and over again, but sure enough, there it was, grace upon grace upon grace.

This is what freedom in the desert looks like. First, we wake up to the reality that we are God's, and second, we begin to live as though we are children. It's that same pattern that will carry over into the New Testament in Paul's letters. Many of them have two parts. The first part is Paul telling them: "This is what is true of you," then the second part is him saying, "Now go live into it, live like it's true."

The desert is a dangerous place, but it is where we learn to live into our freedom with God. I want to leave you with one final exhortation: when your wilderness gets hard, the temptation is always to say, "Geez, in Egypt at least we had bread." God knew that would be a temptation for them, so what did he do? Look at verse 10: **And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the (wilderness).**

The Promised Land lies ahead of us, but the way to get there is through the wilderness.