

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Not Fake News: Who, What, When, Where, Why 3. Why? To Eat, To Eat

Exodus 16:2-4a, 9-12 The 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.... 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.'"

Isaiah 25:1, 6-10a O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.... On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. 8Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. 10 For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

I had thought about starting today's sermon for this World Communion Sunday – the latest in a series about how the stories from the Book of Exodus can remind us of the real news in the midst of a world that too often is full of fake news – with the observation that our God revealed the Divine culinary tastes by what was sent to those Hebrews there in their wilderness wanderings. Did you notice? God sent them meat and bread. As the political ads say, "I approve that message!" *"At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread."* I thought about pointing out that God didn't send kale or zucchini, and then trying to make a dietetic point from that but even I have my limits. I did realize, though, that if I had been one of those ancient

Hebrews I might have pushed my luck with God by saying “Couldn’t You have sent a nice baked potato too?”

But, as I say, such a flight of fancy wouldn’t get us very far because the point of the story is not so much *what* was sent but **why**. Why. Sociologists have a phrase they use that you might have heard: food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a “lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.”¹ Worldwide, more than 800 million people live with that condition every single day. 17.4 million homes across the United States [are] populated with more than 48 million hungry people.² In the last decade, Colorado has been one of the states which has seen a 30% increase in food insecurity.³ I have heard our own Ann Lantz, Director of Ecumenical Social Ministries, echo words said by one food bank director as being just as true of Colorado Springs:

As more people have gone hungry, the demographics of the food bank’s clientele have changed. Households that have never before needed assistance are now appealing to the meal providers of last resort. “We’re seeing more seniors, we’re seeing more families with small children, and we’re seeing more of the working poor”

“A lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” That bland-sounding, government-issued prose simply doesn’t begin, though, to address the awful too often life-long consequences of food insecurity: hungry mothers give birth to premature babies who often have a host of problems, lack of food in the first crucial three years’ of a child’s life can negatively affect brain development forever, hungry

¹<https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/the-return-of-american-hunger/4920>
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³<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty.aspx>

children are up to 12 times more likely to be in chronic and aggressive conflict at school and are much more likely to become homeless adults, and “hunger reduces a child’s motor skills, activity level and motivation to explore” his or her world.⁴

The Hebrew people were also hungry; they too were “food insecure.” And you and I dare not “spiritualize” this story or simply see it as a long-ago tale with a report of weird alleged miracles that have little to do with us. No, the point of the story is this: **hungry people need to be fed, and God will seek to use the resources available to do so, and will ask us to be a part of those resources.** You see, it turns out that that weird miracle of daily meat and bread may not have been so weird after all. As my wife Barbara shared with me, there exists on the Sinai peninsula a type of plant lice (and doesn’t that sound tasty!) that punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from its juice. This substance is a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day, it disintegrates, just like its Biblical counterpart. But in the cool of the morning, it congeals. It has a sweet taste, rich in carbohydrates and sugar. The locals bake it into a kind of bread and call it manna-bread from heaven. And as for quail, in that part of the world, migratory birds flying north from Africa or blown in from the Mediterranean are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.⁵ Our God is indeed resourceful!

But here in Colorado Springs, there are no goo-excreting plants and quail don’t plop down on our front lawns every evening. The resource that God has is us, us. And that brings us back to the meaning of World Communion Sunday. Now, for many of us

⁴**Ibid.**

⁵**Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus in Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Louisville: John Knox Press) 1991, p.182. Cited in a sermon by Barbara Blaisdell, “The Exodus Stories: 5) Rain Down Bread,” preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, October 1, 2017. Interestingly NPR also notes that there are many documented instances of “raining fish” and other small animals <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/28/554242564/it-rained-fish-in-mexico-authorities-say-no-its-not-the-end-times-we-think>**

Disciples we don't quite get the hoopla around this day. After all, **we** come around the Lord's Table **every** Sunday. Moreover, we say that all are welcome. Have you ever read the lines in our worship bulletin every Sunday that explain communion: *"This is Christ's table, a sign of God's unconditional love. All who would know that love through Jesus Christ are welcome to join in this symbolic meal."* But you need to know that part of the hoopla of this day is that we are unusual in our practice and our understanding. To this day, there are many denominations, many expressions of the church, that will not allow their members to take communion with other denominations, and many denominations and expressions that welcome only those whom they count as "qualified" to come to this Table. And for that matter, many denominations do not observe weekly communion, but only do so once a month or once a quarter or even only once a year.

So, the fact that on this day Christians of every color and kind, every understanding and flavor, come together on the same day to celebrate communion is at least a partial step towards doing what God hopes we will together help God to do -- which is indeed to long for, pray for, work for that day when every child of God is food secure, when every woman, man, and child is fed, and loved, and safe. In other words, we dare not ever simply "spiritualize" what we do and what God does at this Table. This Table is never simply only about your or my personal relationship with Jesus. And while it should never be a partisan place, it is always nonetheless an inescapably political place, for politics in its most basic meaning is simply how we ethically and morally organize ourselves as a people and how we make sure that folks are protected. For after all, as I noted last week, this Table was born at the Passover Meal when the Hebrews gave thanks for God's political victory over a cruel and unjust ruler. This Table is never simply a spiritual fast-food drive-through where we get our food and go on our way. No. And World Communion Sunday reminds all of us, around this wide world,

that we are in this together, for God has called us as one body to celebrate the grace and hope of God that indeed wherever there are hungry people that one day they shall be fed.

Let us return back to our original question: **Why** did God feed the Hebrew people with manna and quail, and why does God call us together with our brothers and sisters across the globe on this World Communion Sunday? I believe the answer is simple: God intends the hungry to be fed and wants and expects us to join in that task. At the same time, God ever-reminds us that it is God who is the sovereign of the universe, not us; the degree to which we succeed or fail in addressing the problem of those who hunger does not change the fact or the degree of God's unconditional love for each and all. And that is a comfort and our source of hope and, paradoxically, what can motivate us. You see, in the face of such a huge problem we may be tempted to become immobilized with "compassion fatigue," we may be tempted to throw up our hands and do nothing, we may be tempted toward cynicism and apathy. But such responses are really, to use an old word, blasphemous because they all implicitly assume that it's entirely up to us and that God really isn't a part of our efforts and really can't be trusted to move creation towards its appointed end.

But God will do so, and therefore we can indeed play our part knowing it doesn't all finally depend on us either. Throughout the Bible, there are many depictions of what the final reign of God will look like, the end to which God keeps bending the universe, the feast where all are fed that we foreshadow on this World Communion Sunday. But one of those depictions that I love comes in our second scripture for the day, where the prophet Isaiah tells of God's ultimate goal for creation. *"...the hand of the Lord rests upon this mountain,"* says Isaiah. Why is that such a fitting and profound image? Well, did you hear what it is that they are all doing together on that mountain? They're **eating**. *"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich*

food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”

Nor is it just junk food or Big Gulps that the Lord provides on that mountain, Isaiah says, but **delicious, rich and nourishing** food! To the original hearers of this passage, this would be a moving testimony indeed to God’s bounty and goodness, now and forever. Why? Well, because the Hebrew people had been in captivity in Babylon, much like their forebears had been captive in Egypt. Despite their sometimes rose-colored memories, they never had enough food to eat at all, much less “rich food.” They ate what they could and it was never quite enough. Nor did they have the luxury of letting their wine age; in a desert culture where water quality can be suspect, wine is a way of avoiding disease – but it means that when you don’t have enough wine you drink it when you can – skins and stems and everything – because you are thirsty and not to drink might mean to die. But **now**, now, on **this** mountain where the hand of God rests, there is food, abundant food, rich food, food and "well aged wines strained clear" for all.

We often think of the celebration of communion as one of the things that links us with Christ’s whole body of believers across the world. And it is indeed the sign that God’s love through Christ is larger than anything that tries to divide the church, it is the reminder that God feeds everyone who calls upon the name of Christ even when we might find ourselves in profound disagreement with them. It is the sign and reminder to us that God’s house and God’s table is always, always wider, God’s hospitality more encompassing, than we can know, it is the sign of a coming Kingdom where all Christ’s children are fed.

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” We gather this morning in sight of our own mountain and we and the whole

world are presented with this feast of God. This is not just a sip of juice and a chunk of bread. No, it is the sign and surfeit of an overwhelming grace that sustains us in this life and forever. It is the sign of a God who both calls us to this Table to be fed and sends us forth to feed others in God's name – that no child might ever know the debilitating of hunger ever again, that no parent would ever cry desperately fearful tears over where the next meal is coming from, and that all, all, would know that they are fed, safe, and loved. It is what Moses said at the end of the story of the manna: "Eat today the bread of heaven, for today is the Sabbath and the Lord is with you." For such is the gospel of Moses and of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we believe it and help God make it ever more so.⁶ Amen.

⁶These final two lines adapted from Blaisdell, *ibid.* I'm very grateful to Barbara for sharing her sermon with me; it provoked and jumpstarted this sermon.