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## Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 4. Getting Fed

Psalm 145:15-19 Adapted from The Message All eyes are on you, O God, expectant; you give them their meals on time. Generous to a fault, you lavish your favor on all creatures. Everything GOD does is right- the trademark on all God's works is love. GOD's there, listening for all who pray, for all who pray and mean it. Those who are in awe of God find that God does what's best for them - God hears them call out, and saves them.

Selections from Psalm 104 NRSV You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart... O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures... These all look to you to give them their food in due season.

For those of you who have known me awhile, you know of my deep love for vegetables. Well, no, that would not be true, would it? You've heard me joke that I would be delighted to take up gardening once someone develops bacon plants or shrimp trees. Despite Melba Mayall's earnest efforts as a former dietician to convince me of the narrowness of my ways, I have mostly remained an unrepentant sinner, eating salads happily (although I do view salads as simply the carrier of croutons) but continuing to flee the horrors of cooked vegetables. It's kind of a fun recurrent schtick to proclaim my culinary pickiness from time to time, knowing that you laugh along with me.

But this morning, as I have been considering and praying over the psalms for this day, the latest in our summer "road trip" through the Psalms, I find that my self-proclaimed disdain for vegetables is not cute or funny, but embarrassing and even a bit shameful. Why? Well, listen to those words again: "All eyes are on you, O God, expectant; you give them their meals on time." "You cause the grass to grow for the

cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth....” I hear those words this morning knowing that I have never – unless by my choice – missed a meal. I have never seriously wondered when I will eat again. If I don’t wish to eat, it’s not because there is nothing to eat, it’s because I have the luxury in the midst of enough food to choose not to eat. I have never known the experience of not being able to feed my children, watching them cry themselves to sleep because their empty bellies hurt so badly. I have never known the gnaw of nighttime pain from not having been able to find any food to eat that day. My disdain for vegetables is only possible because I have never known what it is like to not have enough; I can choose to neglect my vegetables because I enjoy the luxury of always having had alternatives that will fill my stomach.

But, my friends, so, so many of the earth’s peoples do not have that choice, have never known that luxury, would cynically sigh or turn away in frustration at the Psalmist’s assertion that God gives everyone their meals right on time. I do not cite these things simply to make you or me feel guilty. As I said in an earlier sermon in this series, guilt can sometimes be a good thing, causing to know that we have failed to do something we should have done or have done something we shouldn’t have done. But the feeling of guilt all by itself is not helpful especially when we act as if by simply feeling guilty we’ve done something about the problem when we have not. So what shall we think about all of this? What shall we do? What does the Psalm have to teach us about our opportunities and obligations in this day and age? Well, to begin to answer those questions, let’s return to the context in which the Psalm was composed.

Scholars suggest that this Psalm originated a couple of thousand years ago. The lands that we now know as the Middle East were sparsely settled and had probably only a few hundred thousand people.<sup>1</sup> Cities were not cities as we know them, but

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_Jewish\\_population\\_comparisons#Ancient\\_and\\_medieval\\_times](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Jewish_population_comparisons#Ancient_and_medieval_times)

towns of a few thousand people. Most folks farmed; the lucky few were also able to keep sheep or goats. Most people would never travel more than ten miles from where they were born and the extended family was key and crucial to being able to literally stay alive. And those ancient Jews had a practice that they had observed for generations: those who farmed never, ever harvested every last square foot of their crop. No, they always left the edges of the field unharvested so that the poor, the family-less, the widow and the orphan knew that they could always find grain to harvest from those fields' edges. It's a practice that nowadays we call gleaning and it was a cardinal virtue and value and practice going back to the dawn of the Jewish people. Now, eating handfuls of ripened grain may not sound like tastiest of meals, but it did make it possible for those on the margins, those on the edges to live.

What, then, does all of that, from a much different time and context, have to do with our day and time? Two things: First, in an era in which the entire Jewish population of a vast territory was less than the population of modern-day Colorado Springs, it was indeed **possible** for family and synagogue to take care of the needs of the poor among them, to have practices that gave some security to those whom Jesus later called "the least of these." That is simply no longer the case. We live in a country of 325 million people; upwards of 20% of folks move each year,<sup>2</sup> a smaller and smaller percentage have extended family nearby, and dramatically fewer are part of any faith community. The point? **It is simply not possible for church and synagogue and mosque to replace the assistance to the needy from social programs that have come to be necessary in our technological, mobile, non-agrarian economy.** The non-partisan organization Bread for the World estimates that every faith community in this country would need to give over \$700,000 a year for the next ten years to offset

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.melissadata.com/enews/articles/0705b/1.htm>

projected cuts to “programs that aid the needy.”<sup>3</sup> As economics writer Michael Hiltzig says, “The idea that community or faith-based charities were more efficient, effective and capable than the government of addressing economic stringency hasn’t been true since the industrial revolution transformed the U.S. from an agrarian to an urban nation,” and it’s certainly not true in comparison to an agricultural society of 3000 years ago! “To suggest that such organizations can effectively supplant government social programs is worse than a mere fantasy — it’s a cynical and dangerous fantasy...”<sup>4</sup>

What’s the second point to be learned from the situation of that long-ago Psalm? Well, I remember one of my mother’s sayings that seems apt. She was the one who, when I was little, did most of the grocery shopping and cooking for our family. I can remember her more than once standing in front of the refrigerator and saying “Well, I guess the groceries aren’t going to magically fly here from the store” or, at dinnertime, “I guess dinner isn’t going to cook itself.” She, of course, was right – I never once experienced groceries being teleported from Safeway, a la Star Trek-style, or a meal that magically appeared on the table without the work of planning and preparing. And that reality that it took my mother’s work to get us provisioned and fed also was indicative of just how many people made it possible for us to eat. She didn’t have to go out into the yard and slaughter a cow, she didn’t have to plant and water and fertilize and harvest the vegetables she served. But someone did. Someone did all those things and countless others – the workers who harvested or butchered, the packers who prepared the food for transport, the truckers who got it from farm to store, the grocery staff who kept the shelves stocked, and on and on and on.

And that’s exactly the second point of our long-ago Psalm: **getting fed on our journeys is always a *partnership***. None of us, thank goodness, has to live like early

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<sup>3</sup><https://thinkprogress.org/religious-congregations-trump-budget-cuts-45e0c61fad4c>

<sup>4</sup><http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/30/business/la-fi-hiltzik-20140330>

American explorer Kit Carson who for two years didn't eat anything that he hadn't personally plucked, gathered, or killed. We eat because others help feed us – a whole chain of folks whom we will never know. It is the same, then, with God's good gift of food. I am struck by that line in Psalm 104 where the writer is describing God: "*Generous to a fault, you lavish your favor on all creatures.*" The problem is that we humans have not held up our end of the partnership with God. God indeed lavishes food, wants all people to be fed, wants no one to live with the misery of a chronically empty stomach, and has made it possible for there to be enough food for all of God's creatures. You see, there IS enough food on this good earth so that no one should ever have to go hungry. The world produces 17% more food than it did thirty years ago, but almost one billion people still lack enough food to eat.<sup>5</sup> The world already produces enough food to feed **10** billion people,<sup>6</sup> yet one-fifth of the world's people are hungry. Why?

The answer is actually simple; in the words of one writer: "Hunger is caused by poverty and inequality, not scarcity."<sup>7</sup> Or, from the perspective of the Psalm, our partnership with God has gone awry, and the food that God lavishes does not reach everyone that it needs to. Now, some of that is due to natural disaster. Long-running and horrific drought-caused famine in much of Africa has almost overwhelmed the transportation structures that could get food to those folks. Sixty percent of the world's hungry are women and children, and research shows in every culture and country, among every religion and value system, that reducing the birth rate is the single most important factor in the reduction of poverty and an amelioration of hunger. Where women are repressed and abused and subject to the whims of men, poverty increases,

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.oxfam.ca/there-enough-food-feed-world>

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/world-hunger\\_b\\_1463429.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/world-hunger_b_1463429.html)

<sup>7</sup><https://grist.org/food/so-can-we-really-feed-the-world-yes-and-heres-how/>

birth rates rise, and hunger increases<sup>8</sup> – and God’s hopes are thwarted.

Let us return to where we started. How do we honor the partnership that God has made with us, a partnership that underlies every word in both our Psalms, a partnership that can be seen in the history of the Jewish people when God reminded them that out of their gratitude they had an obligation to care for the poor. The world is such that it is no longer possible for extended families and faith communities alone to care for those in need, to feed all the hungry, and so our understanding of how to best partner with God so that the words of the Psalms become ever more true means that we must address both the **symptoms** of a partnership gone awry, and we must address the **causes**. We address the symptoms when we host homeless families through IHN – which we’ve just finished doing this week – and when we add to our grocery lists extra food for Ecumenical Social Ministries’ work with the needy and the hungry. And make no mistake: symptoms are important – when you have a terrible cold you may not be able to slay the virus that is its cause but you can take your Nyquil so that you at least feel human. And then there are some simpler things we can each do that will make a huge difference; in the words of writer Nathanael Johnson: “We can also be a lot better at sharing our portion of food, by eating less, wasting less, and choosing more environmentally responsible meals.”<sup>9</sup> I think that means that as part of my own partnership with God, I may even need to learn to like vegetables!

But we can, as a people, as Christians who want our nation, our government, to be peopled by men and women driven by true Christian values, we can also insist that the root causes be addressed. We can ask those who lead us to make sure that family planning help is still made available to women worldwide to help spring them from the trap of poverty and too much fertility. We can practice responsible carbon stewardship

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<sup>8</sup><https://grist.org/food/so-can-we-really-feed-the-world-yes-and-heres-how/>

<sup>9</sup>ibid.

and insist that our leaders take seriously the increasing famine and rising sea levels caused by carbon-rampant technology. We can insist that food never, ever be used as a weapon of foreign policy, for that would grieve God. Mr. Johnson provocatively puts the point this way:

It doesn't work for governments take complete control of food markets, but it's also a bad idea for governments to completely wash their hands of responsibility for feeding people. If left entirely to market forces, food [always] flows toward wealth and away from poverty, which leads to famine. Governments must intervene to prevent hunger. Social safety nets — in the form of meals, money, healthcare, and education — really do increase the likelihood that children born into poverty will be able to go to school and make better lives for themselves.... To make this possible, governments must provide safety nets and infrastructure, while cutting red tape.<sup>10</sup>

The title of a hymn we sometimes sing seems an apt summation for this part of our summer's road trip: "Called as partner's in Christ's service." Listen to the words of its final verse:

So God grant us for tomorrow, [new] ways to order human life  
That surround each person's sorrow with a calm that conquers strife.  
Make us partners in our living, our compassion to increase,  
Messengers of faith, thus giving hope and confidence and peace.

*Will you pray with me? O God, show us how to move from guilt to gratitude, and from gratitude to giving. Help us have the courage as individuals to do those things that can help someone be fed. Help us a people, as a nation, to be led by your vision of a world where, indeed, all are fed, all are loved, all are cherished. May it be so. Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup>ibid.