

## **I fed you in the wilderness**

### **Exodus 16 by Patty Friesen (April 30/17)**

On Easter Sunday two weeks ago, God led the children of Israel safely through the dangerous waters of the Red Sea. God said, I bore you on eagle's wings. On that day Israel watched the hand of the Lord pile up the waters of the sea, so Israel passed through on dry ground. Then today, Israel forgets that the hand of the Lord saved them and they complain, "If only we had died by the hand of the lord in the land of Egypt, while we were sitting by the flesh pots, eating until we were stuffed."

That one sentence is enough to tell us what co-dependence Israel learned during their generations in Egypt. Slaves though they were, they learned to rely on the deceptive abundance of the empire. The fertile Nile Valley was the green miracle of the ancient Near East. The Nile provided food in abundance and Pharaoh, the god-king controlled the Nile – or so he thought. And his servant Joseph, who initially saved the world by storing up food, took in so much food and land and people, that he needed storage cities of Rameses and Pithom which Israelite slaves built. When the slaves became fruitful and multiplied, the new Pharaoh became frightened and tried to drown their babies in the Nile. Then the slaves cried out to God and God's mighty hand delivered them from Pharaoh.

Who could forget that, the horror and the deliverance? But the ex-slaves did forget. No sooner were they out of Egypt than the Israelites started longing for the very slave economy that was killing them off. Even though the slavery system abused them, they were dependent on the system to feed them so much so that they couldn't imagine independence and freedom and trust in God for a new way of living. Their anxiety and

old dependencies on hoarding and storage cities distorts their memory of how they were slaves to the system in Egypt.

God responds to their forgetfulness: Look I am about to rain down for you bread from heaven, and the people shall go out and collect just enough for each day. Plus there is an extra provision given on the sixth day so that they may rest on the Sabbath.

Keeping the Sabbath requires trust that one's needs will be cared for that day by God.

Israel's complaint is dealt with by a massive disclosure that God is powerfully and decisively present.

Moses through Aaron invites Israel to draw near or to gather in worship. When they do, they see the glory of the Lord and they can relax in that glory. And from that glory comes meat and bread blanketing the wilderness ground around them. The wilderness which had been so threatening of death has become a place for abundant life. God's generosity requires trust for daily bread. There is no hoarding allowed here. God will provide enough for everyone equally. But the people can't handle it, they try to replicate the ways of Egypt by storing and hoarding out of anxiety and greed. However, this bread of heaven cannot be stored up. The bread of distrust breeds worms, turns sour and melts. But the bread of trust was daily bread feeding them for 40 years in the wilderness.

In verse 32, God says, let an omer of manna be kept throughout your generations in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness. The bread was put in a jar that travelled with them for 40 years and became a "jarring" reminder of God's providence. The jar was part of the testimony of God's goodness to them along

with Aaron's rod and the 10 commandments kept in the Ark of the covenant in the tabernacle; visual reminders every time they met for worship.

In the Lord's Prayer, the disciples are summoned to pray for daily bread. We are to rely on God for each day's supply without anxious hoarding. God knows what we need and faithfully feeds us from heaven. Jesus himself becomes the bread of heaven that we rely on daily to feed and save and guide us. Like the manna in the jar that reminded the Israelites of God's feeding them, every time we take communion, we are reminded of our trust in God's feeding us in Christ.

We may need to take communion a little more often to remind us of God's feeding us in our wildernesses. If we were Catholic, we could be taking it every day or if we were Lutheran, we could be taking it once a month. But we Mennonites have other manna jars to jar our memory. Every time we grow food and share it with others, we are holding up the manna jar of God's abundance. Every time we serve at Friendship Inn, we are holding up the manna jar of God's abundance to share food with our whole community. Every time we serve *verenike* at the MCC Sale or hamburgers at the Food Grains Bank Sale, we are holding up the manna jar of God's abundance to feed the world. But it's not just about us and what *we* do. It's about what manna we receive from those we serve.

Some of us know Vanessa from Friendship Inn. She first came to Friendship Inn as a guest. She knew she could count on them when she was hungry or needed milk for her baby's bottle. She was struggling with an addiction to crystal meth and knew she needed a change. Friendship Inn became that catalyst for change. She was offered a job helping out. "That was pretty much the day I quit using, was the day I started there and

I've been clean ever since," she says. Six years later, Vanessa is the weekend supervisor, managing the dining room, filling in where needed in serving and interacting with guests.

Sandra Stack, executive director of Friendship Inn says the focus at the facility has shifted to focusing on teaching people to fish, rather than giving them fish, she says. Offering employment is a big part of that. Most of the staff we start with have never had steady jobs before. We teach them that. Some former employees have now got jobs with the city. Harvey Mercedi started coming to Friendship Inn as a child. Now he is on the other side of the table. A job at the Inn helped Harvey get off a dark path. "I've gained responsibilities. I've got a child now. My life has changed dramatically." Sandra Stack responds: Friendship is our name and friendship is the core. We believe the more we love and the more we show compassion and commitment to the people that walk through the door, the more they're include to do for themselves. (Star Phoenix Mon. Dec. 14/2015)

I like going to Friendship Inn because it reminds me of God's presence in dark places. The children of Israel needed daily reminders of God's presence because the wilderness was a tough place. Perceptions are distorted in the wilderness and old habits seem better than new freedoms. We think we see an oasis in the wilderness but it turns out to be a mirage. On the other hand, with God's help, plain rocks can turn into springs, and dew into bread. But it takes trust and giving up of our anxieties and quest for control and disillusionment that I can fix things. It takes drawing near for a look at God in personal time or worship or service. This spiritual dilemma is our own as well as the Israelites.

When we find the providence of God in the midst of our wilderness then we have remembered something that the children of Israel kept forgetting. Let us pray...

Gracious God, thank you for your faithfulness in our lives, for bearing us on eagle's wings through illness, job searches and death of loved ones. Thank you for giving us daily bread of friendships and enough strength for each day. Help us be faithful to you as you are faithful to us. Amen.