

Chew on That for Awhile

Exodus 16:1-15

What is it that you chew on? In other words, what do you like to eat? When it comes to food, God definitely has a sense of humor. Everything he created that tastes good really isn't all that good for us; and the really healthy stuff oftentimes doesn't taste that good. Give me a choice between brussel sprouts and chocolate, you can measure my decision-making time in nanoseconds. I actually do try to focus my eating habits on the four basic food groups – ice cream, popcorn, cheesecake, and of course, chocolate. But it does seem to me that everything that satisfies our taste buds settles on our waistline, clogs our arteries, and sends our blood pressure soaring. Sometimes it just doesn't seem fair.

Okay, I'm complaining. I'm not alone. The Israelites complained a lot also. In fact, the word "complaining" appears, in one form or another, seven times in our passage alone. They've been freed from slavery, and had witnessed miracle after miracle, like the ten plagues that forced Pharaoh to relent, and the parting of the Red Sea to secure their escape. Now they're in the Sinai wilderness, and they are hungry. They're so hungry that they not only bellyache, but they lament that they'd like to go back to enslavement, thank you very much. It wasn't much of a life, but at least they had food to eat.

What does God do? He feeds them. God may have a sense of humor, but he is also deeply compassionate. He brings forth bread, manna in the early texts, as well as quail to feed the Hebrews. End of story, right? Well, not quite. You see, God had a couple of guidelines for them. They were to gather only as much as they needed for each day. There was not to be any stock-piling. Then, God said, on the sixth day they were to gather two days worth of food, because the seventh day was a day of rest, when they were not to gather at all. Pretty straight-forward. End of story, right? Well, not quite.

There's a whole lot of stuff going on here, some of which the Israelites were not even aware. God, however, was aware. But isn't that always the case? God knows more about what is going on with us than we do ourselves. The fundamental question is this – were the Israelites complaining just because they were hungry? No, of course not. And if hunger wasn't the real issue, then what was, and what was it that God knew that the Israelites did not?

For starters, how about the issue of miracles. Would a genuine miracle enthrall you or terrify you? Think about that for a moment before you answer. The Israelites had seen some mind-boggling miracles – locust, frogs, the Nile River running red, among others, and the last plague that secured their freedom, the death of the first-born of all Egypt, except for the Jews, because God had told them to mark their doorways with lamb's blood. If you had seen all that, what would you have thought about God? Would not God's power alone have overwhelmed you? Following the stupendous miracle of the parting of the Red Sea would you perhaps have wondered, "What in the world is God going to do with us? What's next?" And, of course, you wouldn't have known. You would want to trust, but there would always be that nagging thought that you might be caught up in the next maelstrom. God can be majestic; God can also be terrifying. For many of these Hebrews, God may well have terrified them. They were free, yes, but they didn't have any idea of what to expect.

When God comes to us in whatever way God does, it may strike us as a miracle, and it may not. We may just sense a nudge, or the experience of God may totally overwhelm us. However it happens, the next question has to be, "Okay, Lord, what do I do now? What do you want of me?" And that can sometimes be quite scary.

Then there is the issue of freedom. We Americans tend to take our freedom for granted. After Nine-Eleven, we might not feel as safe as we once did, but we are still free. Thus, we would assume the Israelites would have been thrilled to be free. Were they really? I wonder. Slavery is no picnic, but after several generations it can become a way of life. Suddenly becoming free might have been very terrifying in and of itself. In slavery they had been taken care of, not well, but at least they were housed and fed. Not everyone who becomes freed is happy about it. There are many stories of our South when the Civil

War ended and the slaves were emancipated. Many of them elected to stay on the plantations and continue to work for their original owners because it was the only life they knew. To venture out on their own to begin a new life was, for many of them, too scary an idea to contemplate.

Does God understand all of this? Yes, he does. God also understood things the Israelites did not. There were a couple of million people out there in the wilderness milling around and complaining about being hungry. While they were hungry to some degree, what they really were was stressed – stressed over not understanding God who could manifest the kind of power they had seen; stressed over not knowing what to do with the freedom they had suddenly attained. What happens when people get stressed? They eat. I know I do. Don't you? Stress me out and I become a chocoholic junkie. The Israelites complained about wanting food. They wanted a lot more. They wanted security. They wanted to know who this God was, really. So, give us food, they grumbled, and maybe we'll be satisfied. Give me chocolate, I think, and I won't be so stressed. It rarely works, though.

But God acceded and provided food for them. But why did God lay rules upon them for its gathering? It's simple - there is only so much of anything in the world. Take only what you really need, God says. Don't hoard it. If you do, someone else will have to go without. It applies to food; it applies to gas; it applies to our other resources; it applies to the rain forests. Why build a twenty room house, when eight rooms will suffice nicely? Why have five cars, when two are really all that are needed? You can add your own examples.

There was more than supply and demand going on here. God also wanted the Israelites to get a handle on rules and regulations. These first rules were simple. Gather no more manna than you need for one day; gather two days worth the day before the Sabbath. What God knew, and the Israelites did not, was that he was about to call Moses up on top of Mt. Sinai and hand him the prescription for ordering a new society – the Ten Commandments, followed by about six hundred other laws by which the newly freed Israelites were to live their lives. Without them, they would live in anarchy. God wanted to know if they could follow these two simple rules, because what would come next would be more complicated. The self-control God required of the Israelites in collecting bread from heaven was going to be even more severely tested in what lay before them. The time to start was now. Take no more than you need.

Jesus would later say that yesterday is gone; focus on today and let tomorrow take care of itself. Gather two days worth of manna on the sixth day and none on the seventh. One of the Ten Commandments that God would soon give to Moses and the people would say, "Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy." There, in the wilderness, God was preparing the Hebrew people to take the Sabbath seriously. How seriously do we take the Sabbath? We are here, of course. That says a lot. But God intended the Sabbath to be more than an hour or so of worship. He means it to be a full day of rest, renewal, regeneration, recreation, and re-creation. How many of us truly honor and fulfill it as such?

There is yet another level of meaning in all of this. There is, as there is in most everything, a bottom line. The ultimate issue for the Israelites was not hunger; it wasn't even stress over trying to comprehend the awesomeness of God, or to cope with what it really meant to be free. Our worst stress, as it was for the Israelites, is our lack of trust in God. Does that sound trite? Think about it. In the most difficult situations in our lives, the ones that immediately elevate our blood pressure and plunge our emotions into the depths of depression, if we can focus on the goodness of God and genuinely place our trust in his provision in our time of need, will not our stress be reduced? Of course it will.

What's the bottom line? The Hebrews didn't trust God. God used manna and quail as a means of provision, as something for them to trust. They didn't hold onto it very long. Later, while Moses went up to the mountain to receive God's Commandments, the people complained again, built an idol of gold, worshiped it, and as a consequence, ended up wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

God provided more than bread and quail in the wilderness. He gave the people himself, his word. The author of Deuteronomy would later say, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that

proceeds from the mouth of God.” We sang that this morning in *Seek Ye First*. Jesus would emphasize it by giving us The Lord’s Prayer, which contains the words, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

So often we are a stressed out people. God has provided us food to chew on. He has also given us his promise to always be with us and to always sustain us. He has given us his word. And that is something worth chewing on for awhile. Let me rephrase that. It’s worth chewing on for a lifetime. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 18 September 2011