

“Enough”

By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, John 6:24-35

I give thanks to God to be with you here this morning, worshiping the One who created us and who gathers us. In some ways it feels like I was just here preaching in front of you, and in other ways so much has happened in that short time. This past week my family and I packed up and drove to and from Alma a total of three trips, which was about 20 hours of travel over the course of a few days. It was a long journey in a van with two dogs and two kids. There was complaining and wailing and gnashing of teeth, and then the kids chimed in with their comments, even. We are not yet settled, but this is beginning to feel like home again, and we are grateful.

The Exodus passage today tells us about the Israelites journey in the wilderness. It was much longer than twenty hours and without knowing when the travels would end. Even though being in the car was uncomfortable, we knew that when we arrived we could unpack and start this new journey. The Israelites knew God was leading them but didn't have a timeline. Not knowing what is next can be frustrating. Like good Presbyterians we appreciate things decently and in order – we have our bulletins that tell us what hymn comes next. We know the preacher will most likely not preach more than twenty minutes. We do well with the planned and known. Yet, if this scripture passage tells us anything, if the past year of pandemic has told us anything, it is that we can plan away and our plans can be interrupted. The traveling is part of the journey. The waiting is part of the journey. Rather than thinking we are reaching destinations, they are more like rest stops where we stretch our legs, rejuvenate, and look ahead to the next phase.

Much of the rest stops require us to plan for bumps in the road on that journey. Gather needed supplies, take inventory of our gifts, look ahead, and be flexible. There will always be bumps in the road – we just have to figure out how we will respond. In the Exodus passage the Israelites have been freed from slavery. They had been enslaved by the Egyptians for generations and God empowered Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. We are told they traveled in the wilderness for forty years which is more of a metaphorical way of saying that they traveled for a very long, unknown time.

We enter their journey at the point in which they are complaining to Moses and Aaron – something that was common in this narrative. In fact, this becomes a bit of a litany in the book of Exodus – the people complain, and God responds, the people complain, and God responds. This call and response happens over and over as a way of setting up one of the ways in which humanity responds to God.

We are unsure how real this complaint of a lack of food was in this passage because they had many complaints – yet I suggest we take it seriously. A lack of food and water is a concern and if our basic needs aren't met, we cannot focus on anything else. I have in the past participated in food pantries that required people to sit through an entire service in order to receive food but if people are hungry, they can't concentrate. They are consumed by thoughts of hunger and cannot embody any blessings.

A colleague of mine once told a story of an elementary student. The student was acting up in class, interrupting the teacher, talking over others, and generally not paying attention. The teacher gave him detention nearly every day. Finally, the teacher asked what was going on and why he wouldn't pay attention. “I'm hungry all the time,” he said. “I'm just so hungry.” The kid couldn't concentrate on anything because he was just trying to stay alive.

So the Israelites are just trying to stay alive as they reach out to Moses and Aaron. It is also possible that the people are anxious because they have no clue what lies ahead of them. The only life they've known is in

Egypt, and they don't know where they will find their food, how they will make a living, or where they will live. Their entire lives are turned upside down and they will be required to pivot and try something new, which can be difficult. Humans do not change easily. They lament to Aaron and Moses, "Remember when we were in Egypt and our bellies were full? Remember when we had homes to live in? We should just lie down and die here!" Sometimes when humans become anxious, they look backwards, through those rose-colored glasses, and remember the comforts of the past. Yet, they are forgetting how difficult things were in Egypt – that they were abused, mistreated, and that their stomachs may have been full but their lives were empty. God saved them from a cruel land but this new anxiety has taken over their thinking. God is always reminding us of our history – our accurate history – and that God saves us even when we are complaining. God cares for humanity and tells us we are enough, and makes sure we have enough.

That is God's response here again. God provides the people just enough food and water. God heard the people and let the food rain from heaven – manna, or "what is it?" God's people didn't have to prove themselves but to be loved by God. They didn't even have to trust God all the time – because there was certainly room for questions and complaining and wailing. God is strong enough to take all of that, and even wants us to do so because an unquestioned faith ceases to grow in the knowledge of God. It is through the questions that we learn more about ourselves and about God. It is through that journey that we prepare for the next step.

I am not one who watches the Olympics. I don't dislike them but I've never really been interested. I have found some of the stories that have come up this year interesting, though. This past week American gymnast Simone Biles did something that caused controversy in the Olympic world – she set boundaries for her own mental health and stepped down, not competing, because she knew she was enough without having to earn a gold medal. I think having enough and being enough are tied together. When we see that we are enough, we find that we often have what we need. Biles remained at the Olympics and even cheered on her teammates to gold medals, finding a way to use her gifts of being a supportive teammate. It wasn't that she gave up, it was that she saw a way her gifts could be better utilized for that time.

God creates us to be enough. We don't have to prove our worth to anyone because God has already claimed us and loves us. I found this extremely comforting during pandemic working from home. I heard from many working parents especially that it seemed their work load doubled and their time in the day decreased. Sometimes we have to set one or two small goals for ourselves in a day to recognize what is enough, and that this isn't a race. As we begin our journey together, as we take inventory of our gifts and prepare, know that you are enough, and that sometimes our goals are small, and sometimes they are large, and that we are always enough in God's eyes.

The Gospel reading talks more about food and hungry stomachs and enough. This passage comes after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus, whom I often think of as an introvert, had been among the crowds, splitting fish and bread, and then retreats by himself to power up again. The people, who were amazed by his powers, panicked when they couldn't find him. Maybe they were worried – what would happen if they ran out of food? What if they had other problems and couldn't find him? They immediately go searching for him.

When they find Jesus he tells them that they only went looking for him because their meal had worn off and they were looking for a mid-afternoon snack. This is just one part in a series of stories, or phases in the disciples' journey, where Jesus talks about eating and bread and spirituality. Some of this might be foreshadowing of the importance of what we now call the eucharist. It is a reminder of the importance of gathering as God's people to feast and remember, so that we don't forget the powerful history of God helping the oppressed and lifting people out of bondage. Knowing who we were helps us understand who we are, and how we can continue to become the people God has called us to be.

In this phase, Jesus tells the people that he is the bread of life. When they eat from physical bread they will be hungry again in a few hours, but of this spiritual bread they will never be hungry. Jesus keeps sustaining us in our long journey.

Of course, Jesus says this as part of phase two – after he has fed them. If he had said this before feeding them, they might not have been able to hear his words, like that child in the classroom. Jesus isn't telling us not to feed the hungry but that we must simultaneously feed the physical hunger and spiritual hunger. When we offer to break bread with others we are also ministering with them, telling our stories, listening to theirs, and seeing where God is at work in the world. Meals are life giving in physical and spiritual and emotional ways.

Today might seem like a destination, to have a new pastor, to have the beginning of stability, but let's look at it more as a rest stop. Over the next few months I look forward to breaking bread with you, learning your stories, your joys, your sorrows, your gifts, your dreams for the church and community. We will be sustaining ourselves for the long journey together, the beginning of a conversation. I believe deeply that ministry is about relationships – with one another and with God. As we enter this exciting journey I pray that we offer one another grace and love along the way, while being open to the Spirit's challenge. As we know, sometimes the Spirit's timeline for us is not our timeline. There may be times our rest stops aren't as long as we'd like, and we follow the Spirit wherever They may blow.

May you continue to be nourished by God's Word, knowing you are cherished by the Triune God: the Author of Life, the Bread of Life, the Lover of all Life, and may you know that you are enough and that God has created you to do good things in a hurting world. Thanks be to God. Amen.