

Faith Mennonite Church
Taste & See: God is Good
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Milk & Honey: The blessing and the responsibility
Deuteronomy 8:1-18

Several Sundays ago we heard the story of how God provided manna, some sort of flakey bread that appeared on the ground like dew each morning, when the children of Israel were wandering in the desert for 40 years. And for variety—and a bit of meat—quail appeared each evening that they could kill and eat. Manna and quail. Quail and manna. Manna with quail. Quail kabobs? No matter how creative they got with the name game, the diet remained the same.

When my family lived in Central America, we knew people who had a similar kind of diet. Rice and beans. Beans and rice. And when they were cooked together, the Nicaraguans called it “Gallo Pinto” or painted rooster, after the coloration of barred rock chickens. Unlike the Israelites who complained about the monotony of their diet, I never heard a Nicaraguan, young or old, ever complain about their daily fare. Many families were able to add cheese, eggs, occasional meat, and a variety of fruits and vegetables to the staple, but even when those items were not available, if there was rice and beans people were satisfied. (This remains a favorite food for our family, although not on a daily basis).

So what was all that wandering about in the desert for 40 years with so dull a menu? Is it any wonder that the people complained, rebelled, and questioned God’s providence? One interpretation of the wilderness experience was that it was a time of formation as a people. The Israelites in Egypt had lost their sense of collective identity. God’s promise to their ancestor Abraham that his descendants would be blessed to be a blessing faded from memory as their experience in Egypt spiraled down from VIP guest status in the time of Joseph to slave laborers several generations later.

In the wilderness, the Israelites needed to trust God for the most basic things: food, water, and direction. We know the food story. The direction came in two ways: God provided a rudimentary gps system in the form of a cloud that moved ahead of the wandering mass by day, giving relief from the sun and marking their path. And through their leaders Moses, Aaron and Miriam, God provided a moral path, instructions on how to live together and how to honor the One God.

No one got a gold medal at the end of the wilderness trek; not even Moses. They were human and they failed multiple tests. They circled round, and round, and round. It was as if one generation had to die in order for a new generation to find the new way. Despite the human failing, the God of compassion who had heard their cry and brought them out of Egypt remained faithful; the prize remained the same. The people would finally reach and enter a Promised Land. That’s where our story picks up today.

What a prize!

[A] good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

That was the promise. That was the prize. So much abundance described in four short verses. But we read 18 verses this morning! These four melodic wonders are couched between a prelude and a postlude.

The prelude said: *Remember*. As you enter this land of abundance, remember your days of wandering and your days of hunger. Remember the purpose and meaning of that experience: to be humbled, to trust God, and to realize that the essence of life is not in physical abundance but in our relationship with our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer.

The postlude said: *Remember*. Remember to keep God's commandments, to follow God's way. Remember, when you are eating and enjoying the abundance, that all this is a gift of God, not the result of your hand, of hard work alone. Remember, the abundance belongs to God. Remember, our part in the productive process is enabled by God. God is the ultimate owner; God is the ultimate giver.

Remember. One of the ways that Israel remembered as they settled in the Promised Land, was through the practice of "first fruits." Any of us who garden know the joy of picking that first strawberry and savoring its sweet juice in our mouth. Or the first tender leaves of lettuce or spinach, the first snow pea or green onion. The practice of "first fruits" in ancient Israel was to take that first picking, or the first animal to be birthed, and to offer it to God as a sacrifice. It was a way of saying, "This blessing is from God. God will provide more. God will provide enough."

As I was growing up, my family had quite meager financial resources, but my mother always had a huge garden and we ate well. My mother did a lot of visiting in the community and I don't think she ever went empty handed to a home if there were strawberries or green beans or some other type of produce to be shared.

It was a time when most transactions happened in cash. My parents kept an empty greeting card box in the top drawer of their clothes dresser. That was where they kept the monetary first fruits—10%—of any income they received. I always knew that every Sunday morning, that was where they got their offering to take church. This was the way my family of origin remembered.

Jesus knew how hard it is to remember. Once someone came and asked him to mediate the settlement of their family estate. As usual, Jesus responded with a parable that reframed the question. He said:

The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will

tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself." This is how it will be for anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:16-21)

We're living through a period of serious amnesia in our country. In the political rhetoric over the national deficit and the debt ceiling and our state budget, the strongest political voices don't seem to remember that, despite our current financial woes, we're still abundantly rich in relation to the rest of the world. They don't seem to notice the god of war we've been paying homage to these past 10 years, billions of dollars of homage. They seem to forget that the housing crisis was caused by the age-old temptation to continue building bigger barns, to live beyond our means. They don't acknowledge that in the past generation the wealth in this country has been concentrating increasingly among fewer and fewer people, in part due to tax cuts and loopholes that favor those with greatest wealth.

Some of these elected officials are quick to invoke the name of God, and specifically a Christian God, on their politics. Yet they forget that God's promise of abundance is always intended for everyone—not a certain privileged few. If anyone is privileged in the economy of the God who spoke through the Old Testament Prophets and through Jesus, it is the widow and the orphan, it is those on the margin, the disenfranchised and the foreigner in the land. Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth."

None of us can know the future—whether our leaders will make wise choices for the long-term health of all. We don't know if our economy is headed for long-term decline—another wilderness experience—or if we will continue in this Promised Land of plenty, of milk and honey.

As followers of Jesus, our call is the same in either scenario: we are to put our trust in God, not in ourselves. We are to share the fruit of our land and our hands, not accumulate only for ourselves and our progeny. Every time I come to the church office I pass the children's garden, grown expressly to be shared. It's a small thing in comparison to the huge financial problems that loom in our country, but it's packed with hope and vision. It's a visible marker of first fruits giving. There's space to expand that garden and I hope we will in future years.

What about our lives? Do we also have space to expand: for greater remembering? for giving more frequent thanks to God? for additional sharing? May God guide us into our Promised Land of milk and honey.