

Who Provides?

The Exodus story of the newly freed descendants of Abraham...those sons of Jacob renamed Israel who joined Joseph in Egypt, then many years later were enslaved when the pharaohs forgot who Joseph was...is a foundational story for three faiths...Jewish, Islamic and our own. It is essentially taught the same way in all three traditions. I wonder, if those who first hear it as children think, as I did, how very stupid those folks were...how COULD they want to go back to Egypt?...when the God they had cried out to for help had responded; had sent them someone who had gained them their freedom? They had seen the Egyptian army sent after them defeated. Three days march into the wilderness, the first water they come upon was bitter but their complaints lead Moses to ask the Lord for help. He is shown how to "sweeten" the water. Then following the pillar of fire and cloud of the Lord's guidance they come to a place to camp with 12 springs of water and palm trees. There the Israelites complain about leaving the "fleshpots of Egypt where they had their fill of bread." Why were they re-imagining their life in Egypt so differently from the reality that it had been? Even before the narrative was written, the story that was told made it clear that Moses was acting on behalf of God, on the God of their ancestors...yet when they became fearful...they threatened Moses so that he feared for his life. The passage read from Exodus 16 show us how the Israelites' memories begin to play tricks on them; in their minds, Egypt's house of bondage and land of death has suddenly become some sort of fancy resort. The Nile River which was full of their dead babies has become clear and sparkling; the place where they worked so hard making bricks they were so exhausted they hardly had the energy to eat is now remembered as the land of "never-ending all-you-can-eat buffets." These Israelites in the wilderness are hungry and aren't shy about expressing their preferences to Moses. They want to swap their freedom for slavery. For neither the first nor the last time, people's unhappiness with their circumstances fuels their unhappiness with the leaders whom God used to lead them out of slavery. They accuse Moses and Aaron, of not just leading them out of Egypt's bounty, but also of orchestrating their death. There are two important points which are easy to draw from this passage: first, God who answered their pleas for deliverance is still with them and listening to them. Second, God answers this prayer as well, just not in the way in which they asked. God is still intent on God's purpose to deliver them...still intent on answering their first plea; to free them and be in relationship with them as their God. God provides for the people in the wilderness...feeding them...feeding them daily. In Exodus 16: 12 God specifically states to Moses: I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" Moses was very clear in his explanations to the people when they first saw the "fine flaky substance which covered the ground" and it was given the name manna, meaning "What is it? He told them: "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat." Yet with all this clarity within the

tradition...with the scriptures....when the subject comes up in the gospels...what do these people who have seen Jesus and been fed by Jesus seek...they seek someone who can provide for them like “Moses.” In this Exodus passage there are several lessons for us; lessons which although I think we like to feel superior to those Israelites about who was providing for them in the wilderness...are we really that different from those Israelites in our understandings and grumblings about our world? God does not give them what they ask or pray for; instead the Lord graciously gives them what they need. God, after all, always gives God’s adopted sons and daughters what we need. In the wilderness God has the Israelites in a place where God wants them, a place where they must learn to depend on God for their well-being and survival. God provides for them daily...so they must learn to trust. God’s generous gift of manna and quail serves not only to sustain the Israelites but also to confirm God’s presence with them. God meets their need for food by richly providing with what is called “bread from heaven” in verse 4, and provides not only bread but meat as well. In a society that attaches material explanations to virtually all mundane things, it is a challenge today for us to recognize how God provides for our daily needs. It is among our most important jobs as witnesses to God’s presence in this broken world to remind each other that it isn’t just miracles that display the depths of God’s love. It’s also in the provision of the daily gifts of our lives that we often take for granted that come from God’s loving and gracious hand. There is also the reminder here that we should not be grabbing more than we need from what God so generously provides, that in wanting more than we need and reaching for it, we often leave others to get what they need, if they can...and often what could be abundance is turned into scarcity. God commands us to ration our needs, to trust in God’s provision. But we so often fail and forget and assume that the source of the provision is ourselves...or we look to someone else as did the Israelites looked to Moses believing he provided for them. Despite all that they had seen, those Israelites on their journey through the wilderness and their recorded history with God could never fully put their trust in the Lord whom they could not visualize. When the crowd comes seeking Jesus after being fed by him, Jesus tells them they are seeking him because they have “ate their fill of the loaves”, not because they have understood the sign they were given by what he did. He tells them not to seek him because of those loaves which are perishable, after all they are evidently already hungry again. Instead they should be seeking to understand who he is and the gift that he can give them—the bread of life. These folks bring up the Exodus story, that their ancestors had eaten manna in the wilderness; they want a sign from Jesus, asking for it so that they “may see and believe”. They did understand that Jesus had fed them the day before, but once was not enough for them to believe. When Jesus declared to them that he was the bread of God that comes down from heaven, that he was the gift of life for the world from God...they wanted it, but they did not know how to accept it. In many ways we have the same problem. We have difficulty putting our faith, our trust in a God that no one has ever seen and a Savior whom none of us has ever met in person. I think the challenge we have in believing in

things “unseen” is one reason why we tend to put our faith much more easily in other things...perishable things. Things we can see and touch. Things like career, finances, family, relationships, and our own ability to control our lives. Unfortunately, life has a way of reminding us that our faith in those things may not be rewarded in the way we expect. In a very real sense, most of what we invest our faith in fall under the category of “perishable things” that Jesus talks about in the gospel lesson. He said they followed him not because they trusted in him and in God’s cause of peace and justice and freedom in the world, but because they had just gotten a good meal. In the dialogue of the passage it seems they were looking for a repeat performance. The problem with basing your faith on tangible results, miraculous results is that you become dependent upon them, and it’s only a matter of time before you need more of them to bolster your faith...and you forget about the daily gifts God provides. Instead Jesus was calling them to throw their lot in with him, to trust in him and follow in the path where he led; to join in the mission given to him to bring God’s reign near, to carry out God’s cause in the world. When this mission is accepted, the realization is that God does indeed provide a faith that answers our deepest needs, the deepest longings of our souls. St. Augustine said it this way: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.” The only “bread” that can truly satisfy our hunger is the life that God offers us, the provision of the life in relationship with our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.