

Manna Everywhere

Holy God, Your Word teaches that we and all living beings are enfolded in the story of Your love. Show us the truth of Your sustaining grace, that we might bear witness to the new life we have in You! May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever thought about the amazing power of stories? Stories delight our hearts and challenge our minds, unsettling us and opening our hearts to wonder. Stories use complex characters and the dynamic movement of plot to pull us toward mystery, transforming our understanding of who we are, who others might be, and who we can be together in community. Stories are foundationally about history and change, invention and reinvention, truth-telling and meaning-making about what matters. Of course, stories are not always lifegiving. Some stories manipulate and distort, and different stories can clash with one another.

Examples are all around us. The other day, when I picked up new glasses at LensCrafters, their marketing trumpeted the story that this change in eyewear signaled “a whole new me.” Wow! Here I had been grounding my personal story in baptism and meeting Christ in the Eucharist, as Paul says in Second Corinthians: “If anyone is in Christ, [there is a] new creation,” when apparently, all I needed to do for meaningful transformation was to drop some cash for a new pair of glasses.

Um, thanks, LensCrafters, because I can see better—but I decline your capitalist narrative that purchasing this product will make “a whole new me.”

More seriously, storytelling can manipulate in ways that do terrible harm. Indigenous Peoples’ Day is coming up on October 9th—a cause for joy and solidarity. The European immigrants who flooded to North America, Central and South America, and the Caribbean centuries ago told stories about religious persecution in their countries of origin and divine grace guiding them to these shores. Some of that was true and authentic to their experience. But European settler colonialism became centrally about establishing lucrative outposts of extractive commerce and political power. Colonizers sometimes collaborated with the Native Americans here, but more often they deceived them into yielding valuable resources, forced them off their land, enslaved them, and slaughtered them. European colonizers promoted stories that justified this cruel domination: they saw themselves as “heroes” called by God to bring Christianity and social progress to benighted indigenous groups. No. The fuller story is about Europeans’ ruthless, racist dispossession of Native peoples—a tragic story of greed, the near-obliteration of indigenous cultures, and economic and political injustice the consequences of which are felt to this day.¹

As Christians, we continually confront choices about whether to be complicit with stories of violent domination, such as those purveying the repellent values of white supremacy, ecological brutality, and capitalist greed, or instead to tell the

revolutionary story of God’s gracious provision and invincible love. Let’s listen to Exodus 16, a story that reframes everything we thought we knew.

Long ago, a wise and visionary Israelite named Joseph became Pharaoh’s vice regent. Joseph’s people streamed to Egypt and grew into a thriving community there. They grew crops and herded livestock. Children were born and families flourished. Growth, fresh possibility, and hope were everywhere! Golden wheat waving in the fields; barley, leeks, cucumbers, melons—abundance all around! Until a regime change, and with it, terror. The new pharaoh was narcissistic and cruel. Fearing the burgeoning strength of the Israelites, he enslaved them, breaking their spirit with hard labor and commanding midwives to strangle Israelite male infants at birth. Egyptian oppression almost crushed Israel. But the hand of the LORD was mightier than the whip of the Egyptian overseer! The cries of the oppressed rose up to God, and God liberated them! God’s servant Moses led his traumatized people out of the iron furnace of slavery ^{Deut 4:20; Jer 11:4} into the Sinai desert.

Now, it’s four weeks into their wilderness wandering. ^{Exod 12:2-6; 16:1} The Israelites are famished and exhausted. They need food, and they urgently need to learn how to imagine a life of freedom. Conflict and anxiety percolate. Their bodies are free, but their minds are still in captivity. The wilderness closes in on them, stark and menacing.

Then God frees their imaginations, and they see miracle upon miracle! They see the “glory of the LORD” radiant in the cloud that has led them to this place.

They see quails blanketing the camp—no more hunger! And in the morning, they see something new: “a fine flaky substance” on the ground, white as coriander seed ^{Exod 16:31; Num 11:7} and delicate as frost. They put the substance to their lips: a taste sweet as honey! This astonishing substance, this manna, would save their lives, morning after morning, for the next forty years! All they had to do was to pay attention each morning—to look for the miraculous manna, gather it, and bake it. Miraculously, each person secures the right amount no matter how long they work, and twice the amount materializes in their baskets on the sixth day so they can rest on the seventh day. Gradually, morning after morning, they learn to trust their gracious LORD who brought them out of slavery. One of their singers composes a new song: טַעְמוּ וּרְאוּ כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה “Taste and see that the LORD is good!” ^{Ps 34:8} Where once they could see only menace and deprivation, they’ve learned to see a landscape alive with generative possibility and luminous with blessing!

Now, the naturalist explanation for manna has been known since antiquity. In the Sinai desert and the Arabian peninsula, an edible resin is produced by tamarisk shrubs and the insects that feed on them.² Sweet droplets form and fall to the ground, where they can be collected, pressed into cakes, and baked or boiled. Bedouin in the region, nomadic desert-dwelling peoples, are said to harvest and eat manna to this very day.³ Not a refutation of the miracle—confirmation of our Creator’s boundless grace!

The story of manna in the wilderness was taken as a rich theological symbol even in the time Scripture was still being written. Psalm 78 calls it “the bread of angels,” and the apostle Paul celebrates it as “spiritual food.” ^{1 Cor 10:3} In the Gospel of John, Jesus draws on the manna story when he says he is the “true bread of heaven” that “gives life to the world.” ^{John 6:31–51} Rabbis and Christian theologians alike have said every generation of those who seek God can be numbered among those finding manna in the wilderness. In the third century, the theologian Origen preached that not just Israel but Christians had journeyed long, at first “not having hope and without God in this world,” ^{Eph 2:12} until Christ “descended to us” as the “bread of heaven.”⁴ Further, the words of Scripture are a kind of manna. Origen says, “even today ... the Lord rains manna from the sky. For those words which have been read to us, and the words which descended from God [on Sinai] ... are from heaven.”⁵ The lessons printed in your bulletin this morning are manna. The sweetness of divine teaching is manna! ^{see also Rev 2:17}

This story of manna has freed the imaginations of believers for two millennia, and it can speak afresh to us every morning.

Literally. I mean every actual morning.

What do you notice, when you first wake up and look around? What do you see?

I know, a mug of coffee. Me too. But right after that: what do you see?

Pay attention to even the smallest things.

- You might see something tiny, delicate, evanescent—something you’ve never noticed before that delights you or nurtures your spirit.

- You might see something you're just learning to trust—you know to look for it, but you're not totally sure what it means.
- Or you might see something cherished and familiar, something that has sustained you for years. You rejoice when you see it, you *know* it strengthens you for your work, and you praise God for it. Like manna in Year 28 for the Israelites, or Year 32.

Manna! Open the eyes of your heart—it's all around you!

Every morning, be on the lookout for signs of God's grace! It's always there, especially when we are exhausted and in need of nourishment. That doesn't mean life isn't hard sometimes. We grieve and struggle and are afraid. Injustice is real. Countless people and non-human creatures across the living community of Earth need love and healing, solidarity and fierce advocacy. But manna is there for us, every morning, to fuel us for that work! Paying spiritual attention to the small things will free our imagination to see the love of God fresh every morning! ^{Lam 3:22-23}

The story of manna can be a grounding story for each of you and for this beloved community of St. Thomas's. Manna teaches a revolutionary truth that runs counter to the death-dealing narratives that have done so much harm: the lie that we have to accumulate wealth and hoard resources and wield power against other living beings in order to survive. NO, church! Manna teaches us that we find nourishment, resilience, and hope not in our own power but in God's grace. "With the eyes of

[our] heart enlightened,”^{Eph 1:18} we can learn to pay attention to the hope we have in God, gathering daily what our communities need.

Taste and see!

In the Name of the One who gives life to the world:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Proper 20A

Exodus 16:2–15; Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45; Philippians 2:21–30; Matthew 20:1–16

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ I can recommend dozens of titles in Native Studies to those who wish to learn more. For three examples: Alfred A. Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014); Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019). Appalling traditions of divinely commanded obliteration of indigenous peoples are represented in the Bible itself, most robustly in the book of Joshua. See my Joshua commentary (2019) in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series for ways to wrestle faithfully with biblical rhetoric that promotes violence.

² “Tamarisk” is used of over fifty kinds of shrubs and trees. That the sticky-sweet resin is the digestive excretion of a scale insect known as the shield louse is not something I wish to say out loud in this sermon. See *HALOT* 2:596 on the “yellow-white globules” secreted by shield lice that feed on tamarisk trees “found in Sinai and in North Arabia, *Tamarix mannifera*.” This secretion functions as “glutinous protection for the egg sacs” of the lice and is known as manna or honeydew.

³ The Priestly author of Exodus 16 is insistent that this is a miracle, and no less so for the natural phenomenon that it (likely) was already known to be; see the

tradition-historical arguments of David Frankel, “The Priestly Conception of the Sabbath in Exodus 16,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 59 (2015): 1–25. Also instructive is the discussion of Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1974), 274–283.

⁴ See Origen, Exodus Homily VII, §§4–8 in his *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, translated by Ronald E. Heine, Fathers of the Church 71 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

⁵ Origen goes on, “See if the force itself of the name [*manna*] does not provoke you to learning so that when you hear the Law of God read you always inquire and ask and say to the teachers, ‘What is this?’ For this is what manna means.... For what is ... more splendid than divine instruction? What is sweeter or what more delightful than the words of the Lord which are ‘beyond honey and the honeycomb’?”—that last phrase quoting Ps 19:10. Origen exhorts his hearers, “Let us, therefore, now hasten to receive the heavenly manna. That manna imparts the kind of taste to each mouth that each one wishes. For hear also the Lord saying to those who approach him: ‘Be it done unto you according to your faith.’ And, therefore, if you receive the word of God which is preached in the Church with complete faith and devotion, that word will become whatever you desire.” Ronald Heine cites three rabbinic traditions, including *Exodus Rabbah* 25:3, that claimed the manna tasted as each person eating it wished (313, n73). The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37–ca. 100) comments that in his own time, “even now, in all that place, this manna comes down in rain” (*Jewish Antiquities* 3.1 §6). On the reception history of Exodus 16 in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, New Testament texts, early and medieval rabbinic sources, and later interpretation, see Childs, *Exodus*, 293–304.