

## The Gift of What Is...

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Rev. Daniel A. Smith

*Texts: Psalm 78:23-29, Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15*

I wonder how many of you know a website called Atlas Obscura. As the title suggests, it's a catalogue of obscure stories and quirky facts from places all over the world. One of their headlines this week caught my eye: "Bog Butter, Ancient Beef, and Other Remarkably Old Foods on Display." I had to read it. Then I had to share it with my sister who I just saw last weekend and who has a totally irrational, daily obsession with expiration dates on her food. Like any good little brother, I sent her the article just to gross her out. Did you know that there is a giant, Millenia-old block of butter at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin that spent over 2,300 years surviving in a peat bog! Or that there is a 3,500-year-old mummified beef shoulder that sits in gallery 109 at the Met in New York? Meanwhile, the Isle of White County Museum in Virginia boasts a relatively youthful 119-year-old piece of pork that is said to be the "world's oldest edible ham." It has its own Instagram page and live stream called the Ham Cam! And don't get me started on the somehow still pristinely preserved top two layers of a Victorian wedding cake or the 1700-year-old bottle of wine in Speyer, Germany!<sup>1</sup>

Enter today's ancient story of God raining down Manna from heaven upon the hungry and harrumphing Israelites in the desert. We are told the bread itself has a shelf life of no more than a day, but the story is one for the ages. The Manna was literally their daily bread during their forty years sojourn in the wilderness. Every morning, God would provide just enough for each person. In later verses of this chapter, the text tells us that when they went against God's instruction and tried to save part of it for the next morning, the manna "bred worms and stank." Don't tell my sister! Again, the bread is only meant as their daily portion, a miracle of physical sustenance, and yet the story is ultimately about a deeper kind of spiritual nourishment and resource that can be available to us all, especially when we find ourselves in the midst of life's wilderness moments. Let's dig in a bit more.

First, let's start with Israelites. According to the plain reading of the NRSV, we meet them in verse 2 the wilderness "complaining." I prefer the more textured and time-honored and embodied Jewish translation. Instead of merely complaining, they have been "murmuring." The Israelites were murmuring against Moses and Aaron, they were murmuring and grumbling their disdain and resentment about their current predicament. And already we can relate, can't we? Haven't you sensed a kind of murmuring within yourself and others lately especially with recent news about the Delta variant? Many are murmuring against Covid, murmuring against anti-vaxxers, murmuring against misguided leaders or mixed messaging. And, like the Israelites in the Sinai dessert, we are hungry, perhaps not so much for food, but for clarity, for connection, for orientation in these uncertain times, and ultimately for freedom. With the Israelites, we too might as well say to whoever will listen "You're killing us here." Here we are still? Again? Yet God hears their murmurs and, I believe God hears ours, too!

In the case of Exodus, it helps to remember that God had already brought them out of bondage, opened the sea, laid waste to Pharaoh's army and is now offering them this strange new bread and nourishment in a vast wilderness of transition from being captive to being free. Still in the Book of Numbers, we are told that even after the Manna comes, they're still hungry for something more, and it's not just the food.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.atlasobscura.com/lists/worlds-oldest-food](http://www.atlasobscura.com/lists/worlds-oldest-food)

The political philosopher Michael Walzer helpfully underscores the complexity of this foundational and archetypal story. He says: it “should have been enough but it wasn’t!” He explains that the “manna in the wilderness bred a nostalgia for meat in the house of bondage.” In the Book of Numbers, “their complaint is renewed.” Quoting from Numbers 11: “Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt freely, the cucumbers, and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic: But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, but this manna before our eyes?”<sup>2</sup>

They’re basically saying: ‘Come on Moses! Just make Egypt great again!’ Do you see what’s happening here? They are hungry and murmuring not just for food but for familiarity, and for the life they already know. They are hungry for what was! Again, many of us can relate. Even though they have already been given what they need, the bread and quail, they are still murmuring! After all, what is this manna stuff anyway? Why should we trust that it’s better than what we had before?

The answer to the question “what is manna?” is, in fact, a question, one reminiscent of old Abbot and Costello ‘Who’s on First’ skit. Yes, we are told here and elsewhere that it refers to a fine, flaky bread-like substance that has fallen like frost on the ground. Moses tells them it’s bread from heaven that is sent with conditions that they follow the law and observe the Sabbath -- miracle within a miracle, it so happens that the Manna can last an extra day, but only on the sabbath, so they are told gather a double portion in preparation each week. More deeply, the word Manna, in Hebrew, *Man Hu*, literally means, *What is it?* Manna is both a question and an invitation, and the fact that no one knows what it is was part of the miracle. Its very presence provokes curiosity and awe, and it underscores that there is always a present moment before them that draws them away from the nostalgia for a misremembered or delusional past, away from their murmuring, away from whatever escapist fantasies they may be conjuring about the future. Instead, the Manna is what draws them near to God, into the present moment, into presence itself. Verse 9: Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation, 'Draw near to the LORD, for the Holy One has heard your murmuring.'" Manna is first an assurance that God has heard them! Manna is also a miracle of living in the present moment, and into each new present moment! The question isn’t “what was it?” It’s not, “what will it be.” It’s an invitation to simply notice “what is.”

Part of the reason why the wilderness is depicted as a time of famine and austerity and why it lasts for so long is that it was, quoting Walzer again, like “a new school for the soul.” It’s teaching them, as one 18th century New Haven preacher rightly said, that “in any deliverance there are great troubles and difficulties.” They need to learn again, and again, as Jesus did in the wilderness and as the old saying from Deuteronomy goes, that they will not live by bread alone, that they will need deeper resources of spiritual nourishment to see them through. They will need that good stuff like Manna, that first assure them that someone hears their murmuring, and then centers, orients and grounds them in the present reality, which is in itself an amazing taste of freedom. Walzer reminds us that part of their nostalgia is because there is a kind of *freedom in bondage*. This helps explain their misguided craving of Pharaoh’s fleshpots, literally the stewed meat they ate, as slaves mind you. After all, most persons in captivity are fed something. By the same token, they are learning in this soul school, that there is also a kind of *bondage in freedom*, especially spiritual freedom, in which we are invited to surrender control and bind our lives to God and to God’s instruction for how-to live-in community. The souls of the Israelites are in school for the latter! They are in a freedom school of the highest order! Verse 4, God says “I will rain down bread ...so that I may test them whether they will follow with my teaching or not.” No longer

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, HarperCollins, 1985. pp. 50-52

bound or fed by Pharaoh, they are now bound to and fed by the living God which, like the Manna, is apparently is something of an acquired taste. Gratefully, Psalm 78 reminds them and us that this is the very bread of angels, the gift and feast of the present moment! Was it AA Milne or Eleanor Roosevelt who first said: “Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery but today is a gift, that's why they call it “the present.” Amen to that!

This is such a rich narrative, with more to explore, and yet ultimately it prompts us to consider one thing: what are the resources that nourish and sustain us when we find ourselves murmuring, in a wilderness moment, in a season of turmoil and transition, in a semester of a new soul or freedom school? More specifically, just what is *our* manna? And remember, we can't be greedy about this, or try to store it up lest it turns to worms. It's always just enough for each of us, and just enough for today.

Have you been catching any of the Olympics? I've been appreciating something about the athletes that I've barely noticed before, and it has nothing to do with their extraordinary skill, nor with the competition, scores or photo-finishes of whatever events. It almost always comes at the start, before the buzz or beep or signal to begin, in the close up on a swimmer or a gymnast as they are mentally preparing. It strikes me that what they are all doing in those moments is resourcing themselves or tapping into some resource that is within and beyond themselves. A pause with eyes closed, a deep breath, a moment of profound laser focus on the present, a head to toe settling of their systems just before something within emerges and a split-second spark ignites that seemingly superhuman speed or strength or agility or that has them exploding off a starting block! They aren't murmuring about their years of practice and training. Not then. They aren't fretting about who will be on the podium or not. Not at that moment. Having schooled their bodies and, I would add, their souls, they are ready for an act of sheer presence. Their entire being is prepared to feast on what is it!

The gift of “what it is” is quite simple really. The daily bread God gives us can come as no more than a moment, a pause, a noticing and settling of our murmuring systems, a time to ponder, meet and hold the gift of the present moment, right here and right now! No past or future narrative. No complaint. No expectation. Just presence. Is it enough? Not usually for most of us who are still just learning! But when it is, it is a taste of glory and we can enjoy its power and freedom! It starts by noticing when we are murmuring and making sure someone else is listening, whether God or a friend.

To close and to prepare our hearts for this table, communion is just a gift, imbued as it is with traumatic memory and mysterious promise, yet ultimately, it's an invitation to be fully present, as Christ was, is and always will be for us! Enough with the murmuring and anxiety for this moment. God hears it and understands it. Instead. Just take. Eat. Sense what is around you, and what will soon be on your tongue. Breathe. Settle your system even now and receive with this bread and cup as the gift of this present moment, the mystery and wonder and awe at what it is and let its nourishment emerge within and all around you. Let it come. Let God's “what is” manna pour over you even now. Let your practicing of presence, the presence of God, nourish and sustain you. The well is deep, the resources are abundant and never expiring when we take only what we need for each day. The gift of God! The presence of Christ! The present. Right here. Right now. For me. For you. Amen.