

Year A, Proper 20
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Providence on God's Terms

Well, I don't pretend to understand it, but I know it's true: We're in the midst of an economic crisis. Prices are rising. Unemployment is up. Consumer spending is down. Credit is harder to come by. Houses aren't selling. Investments are dropping in value, and some have evaporated completely. And this week, we've watched as some of the real stalwarts of the economy – Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and AIG – either went bankrupt, or were taken over, or were bailed out by the government. Many of you understand all this far better than I do, but even I know that part of the problem has been a culture of risky investment, in which people who saw themselves as “masters of the universe” gambled their investors' futures – and lost. Now, we don't know exactly what's ahead. And with that kind of deep uncertainty comes crisis.

It's a time when we all could stand to hear a little Good News.

Well, in the first reading this morning, the people of Israel are also in need of a little good news. Just one month earlier, God had liberated them from Egypt; and they'd watched in joy as the Lord threw Pharaoh's horses and chariots into the Red Sea. Now, they've passed from triumph into the wilderness, and they're running out of patience as they wander about, looking for a consistent source of food and water. The people turn on Moses and Aaron, and by extension they turn on God, longing for the good ol' days of slavery when at least they had enough to eat. We're tempted sometimes to write off the Israelites as whiners and ridicule them for losing their faith in the God who liberated them. But if *we* wandered in the desert for a month, wondering where our food and water were coming from, I think we might do a little whining ourselves.

Well, God hears their anxiety and acts to meet the crisis. God gives them quails to eat, meat to satisfy their particularly sharp hunger in the moment. And, for the longer term, God also gives them bread – but not just *any* bread. This is strange stuff – “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’” (Exodus 16:14-15) – which is what the word *manna* means. This bread from heaven will be the Israelites' food for the next 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. It can take a while to get through hard times.

So God provides – but only on God's terms. We find out a few verses later that there are certain restrictions about gathering and eating this heavenly stuff. Each person gets the same amount – a particular measurement of daily bread. No matter how much they try to amass, or how little they actually collect when they go out to gather it, they each end up with the same amount – just as much as they need. And it's all to be eaten on the day it's gathered. If they try to keep some back and hoard it for the next day, the leftovers will spoil by morning. But each day, they find exactly as much as they need, and no one goes hungry.

So, the crisis was averted – but only on God’s own terms. I can imagine the people thinking this was a fairly strange way for God to provide for them. I can also imagine them getting pretty tired of manna after a while and longing again for the meat and garlic and leeks of Egypt. But *God* is God, after all; and beggars can’t be choosers.

Then, in today’s Gospel reading, we hear another example of God having a very particular manner of providing for God’s people. Jesus is telling the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. This story challenges something very near and dear to our hearts: the idea that life – and especially God’s justice – should be “fair” on our terms. Frankly, I’ve always struggled with this parable. I don’t much like the notion that if I work my tail off, I’m going to get nothing better than some guy who only comes in to work at the end of the day. Our culture is all about what we see as our inalienable right to be rewarded in proportion to the effort and quality of the work we do. That hardly seems like asking too much.

But God stops us short every time we find ourselves tempted to see what we have as coming from our *own* efforts and talents. We may do great work in the vineyard, but the master is the one who gets to set the wages. We can be assured that what we get will be enough – as the reading describes it, the workers are paid “whatever is right,” “the usual daily wage” (Matthew 20:4,9). But we *don’t* get an assurance that what we receive will be “fair” in our own eyes, and especially not in relation to what others might receive. As the master in the story says to the one who’s worked all day, “I choose to give to this last [worker] the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:14-16) I hate it when God’s right like that.

So where’s the Good News in these stories about God *not* giving people what they want or what seems fair? The Good News is that God gives us not what we want but what we need. Providence doesn’t happen on our terms but on God’s terms. We don’t get to be the masters of the universe. As much as we may not like to admit it, everything we have comes from God rather than from ourselves alone. And part of God’s agenda in providing for us is to teach us that *God* gets to set the guidelines for how resources should be used. We’re blessed with great freedom in our stewardship, our management, of our little corners of creation. But ultimately, we have to recognize that we live and work within boundaries. Even as we receive God’s abundant blessings, in our national life and our individual lives, Jesus reminds us that we are not in charge of what we get – and that we certainly don’t have a right to receive more and more simply because we think we deserve more and more.

Instead, God gives us something much better than the power to be masters of the universe. God blesses us with the gift of dependence. Especially in complicated and confusing times like these, when it’s a challenge just to understand what our problems *are*, much less figure out how to solve them – in times like we face today, it’s a blessing to remember that we are not in charge. Instead, God is the one who sets the parameters for how resources are supposed to be allocated.

And what does that kind of holy resource allocation look like? Well, it *doesn’t* look like the example of some of the Israelites, who tried to hoard an extra share of the manna that came as a free gift from God. It doesn’t look like laborers in the vineyard being angry because the

master paid them the fair wage they'd agreed to receive. It doesn't look like executives at Lehman Brothers gambling the company because the billions they'd already amassed didn't seem like enough. And it doesn't look like me buying a house that I can't quite afford just because I could get a loan to do it.

No, we can find a much better model of the way God allocates resources right here in this room this morning. In just a few minutes, we will come up here to God's sanctuary, to the edge of heaven itself. We will put out our hands across the rail, into the heavenly realm, in a physical gesture of supplication and powerlessness, revealing to God and especially to ourselves that we cannot obtain what we truly need on our own. And in our hands we will receive the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, the manna that God still provides for God's people.

It won't seem like much at all, judged by the standards of the world – a little wafer without much taste; “a fine and flaky substance” without much oomph to it. But in this meal, in this foretaste of the banquet of the kingdom of heaven, we will receive the presence of Christ himself, and no other resource could ever sustain us more completely. And we will receive that heavenly resource in the way that God intends for all of God's people to be sustained: There will be plenty for all; everyone will receive a fair portion; and everyone will have enough to eat. Thanks be to God, for these and all God's blessings.