



Sermon, March 12, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: "Where Do We Go from Here?"
"Provisions"

Preparation to Receive Scripture: *What is ours to take care of, and what do we depend upon God to provide?*

Scripture:

16:1 The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. **2** The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. **3** The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." **5** On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." **6** So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, **7** and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" **8** And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" **10** And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. **11** The Lord spoke to Moses and said, **12** "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.'"

13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14** When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. **15** When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. **16** This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" **17** The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. **18** But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. **19** And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." **20** But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was

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angry with them. ²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Journeys: What do we take?

Susan and I traveled this last week to Boise in order for me to attend the Northwest Leadership Institute at Boise first UMC. We allowed ourselves two days to get there and two days to return. Always when we go on a journey like that, there is always the question of what do we take with us. What do we need for the journey? What do you take with you when you travel? (*Get congregational responses.*)

This morning’s rather long reading is all about what it takes to sustain us on our journey in life. But it’s also about something else: how our journey tests us and tries us, changing us in the process. So let’s look at how this story might illuminate our journeys as individuals and our journey as a church.

Let’s talk first about the testing of the journey. If you have your Bibles out, turn back to verse 4: ‘Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.”’ Did that strike you as bit odd? Where does God get off posing all these tests? These people just made this massive escape from an oppressive empire and now they on foot, away from all their food sources, shelter, water, pasturage for their animals, no nursery care for the kids, etc. God provides food, but it is couched in terms of a test: “whether they will follow my instructions or not.” Why pose it as a

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test? Is life just one pop quiz after another? Did you ever enjoy pop quizzes in school?

But there's another meaning of the word “test,” and that is “to try something.” The image that comes to my mind is that of a test pilot. The test pilot tests new designs of aircraft, puts them through their paces, finds actual limits in contrast to presumed limits. How does it hold up? Another way to think about this kind of testing is like getting new software for the computer, which I've done many times ever since I first started using a computer back in the late 80's. I download the new software, and then I spend several weeks figuring out how to use it. But I am testing it, seeing what it can do, figuring out what has changed, how to get it do the things I want to, finding the limitations, and considering the possibilities. There is a certain amount of disgust at things that don't seem to improve the system. In the midst of it, every once in a while, I step back and become aware of how my own thinking process has also been changed as a result of using that new software.

The journey the Israelites were on was similar in that they were being given a whole new set of operating instructions that had to slowly “rewire” their entire thinking structure and process, even change their values and attitudes. That doesn't come easily. There were a lot of missteps and failures along the way.

So that then leads to the question of what are our faith struggles today? What is testing our faith? (*Responses*)

In the church model of the 50s-90s, what we thought we needed was a set of plans, guidelines and good programs that told us what to do, how to teach the faith, how to engage youth, how to keep adults busy with running the church, as if that was what being a Christian was all about. But this story is about the spiritual growth and unfolding awareness of who God is and what it means to be a people of God, to be shaped and formed by the presence of the One God. The idea of testing or trying something is not a pop quiz sort of thing, but, rather, more like a test drive or a test pilot, putting a vehicle through its paces to see what it can do.

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To grow in faith, we have to discover what our limitations are as well as our inadequacies and failings. Where do we fall short? At what point are we no longer self-sufficient or able to self-regulate? What borders and boundaries do we need to put up, and how expansive a space do we need to explore?

Faith community helps to erect those perimeters and parameters that are conducive to spiritual, ethical and moral growth. This is essentially what is happening there in the desert. The Israelites are having to grow into spiritual and moral maturity by being given boundaries and conditions, guidelines for behavior. One of the parameters they have to try on is trust and interdependence upon God, and one another. There are no longer Egyptian overlords telling them what to do, when to do it. Nor are there Egyptian overlords providing food for them. They are moving out into self-regulating interdependence.

So this brings us to the bulk of the story: what provisions do we need to sustain us on this journey? There is a saying that reminds us of a very important fact of our existence: “Humanity, despite our artistic pretensions, our sophistication and many accomplishments, owe the fact of our existence to a six- inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.”

Group Reflection

- What do we need to sustain us as a community of faith?
- Will that be necessary for future generations?

Sign seen in a textile mill, "When your thread becomes tangled, call the foreman." A young woman was new on the job. Her thread became tangled and she thought, "I'll just straighten this out myself." She tried, but the situation only worsened. Finally, she called the foreman. "I did the best I could," she said. "No, you didn't. To do the best, you should have called me." (Source Unknown.)

Practice: One-Pointed Awareness (e.g., tasting)