

16th Sunday after Pentecost

“Remember . . . the Fleshpots?”

24 September 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 16:2-15

“Memory feeds imagination” (Amy Tan).

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Most human beings crave what we call a guarantee. We all want to know something with cast-iron certainty. In religious circles, we call this guarantee “the assurance of faith.” Although we speak of faith nearly every day, life has a way of undermining every certitude to which we cling so tenaciously. People make decisions about which truth or part of the truth they consider worthy of the status of “a guarantee.” It is in this search for meaning that brings us to worship. The assurance of faith makes it possible for us to respond to the unexpected life. With great wisdom, Reformed theologian Karl Barth wrote:

People come to church with only one question in their minds: Is it true? The providence of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection from the dead, the forgiveness of sin: Is it true? When we come to church at 2:00 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon for a memorial service for someone we love, the question is even more compelling: Is it true? Can God be trusted on a day like today? We want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt: Is it true? Can I count on this as being trustworthy (Adapted from Joanna Adams, “The Only Question,” *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 268)?

Yet, too often our culture searches for meaning or assurance or a guarantee mostly through our possessions. We call it “materialism.” Webster’s dictionary defines “materialism” as: “*a doctrine that the only or the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress.*” Materialism is nothing other than “*a preoccupation with or stress upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual things.*” People’s need for stuff is the basis of the day’s lesson from Exodus:

[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" (Exodus 16:1-5).

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

[22] On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, [23] he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.' " [24] So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. [25] Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. [26] Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none."

[27] On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. [28] The Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? [29] See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day." [30] So the people rested on the seventh day (Exodus 16:13-30).

Here are three points regarding our text. The first point that this text teaches us is that—God provides. When Israel met famine in Jacob’s time, God directed Joseph to bring his family, and in due course all Israel, to Egypt. In Egypt God by Joseph’s hand fed Israel and offered famine relief. Further, generations later, Exodus tells us that:

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:23-25).

When God heard Israel’s cry, God liberated the people. One of the Bible’s most memorable stories is Israel’s Red Sea escape. This stirring story of people who move from slavery to freedom is a primary reason why African-Americans adopted this Exodus story as their own story.

The second point is simply this: People have poor memories regarding God’s providence. While God has pulled us out of the fire time and again, we seem only to dwell on present circumstances. Like Israel, we become nostalgic—remembering the good old days. We long for these old days of pleasant memory while forgetting that as we look back, and if we were able to be absolutely honest, that the good old days really were not all that great. Those days, like today, are full of strife and trouble.

Israel said to Moses and Aaron, “*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.*” Plainly Israel forgot their earlier cry to God for release from burdens and heavy labor.

The third point: We too often forget what God has done and promises to continue to do for us. Then we take matters into our own hands. One of the ways we try to control our life is by hiding behind the things we possess. Our material well-being is a kind of security blanket by which we try and cloak ourselves. Yet, at the end of the day we are people burned by our possessions. To think that we can wrap up all of life's meaning and value in what we possess is a great blunder that the Bible addresses page after page after page. Our hope and our life's value are in the God who feeds us during famine and liberates us from life's bondage.

There are some of us who have made lifetime mistakes that we were too proud to admit, and swallowed the mistake instead. I read about an unsophisticated boy who went to a sophisticated banquet at which they served coffee. It turned out to be hotter than he realized. When this young man took a big sip of his coffee, rather than burn his mouth, he spit it back into the cup. The whole company looked at him, aghast!!! He stammered for a minute, looked at everybody and said, "I guess there are people here who would have been fool enough to swallow that coffee."

There are some of us, who have been more than half wrong, and we were too proud to admit it and we just swallowed it, and it has burned us. Perhaps we should ask ourselves: What are you chasing? Be sure it is something you really want. Be sure it is your heart's desire.

A person of faith, wanting to live the unexpected life that Jesus offers may remember these three things. 1) God provides. 2) We too easily forget God's providence. 3) As God has provided for us in the past, God's promise for our future is something that we can count on—today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.

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