

What Is This Stuff?

Sunday, September 20, 2026

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Exodus 16:2-15

Luke 11:1-4

I have a memory, from junior high or high school, when a family from our church brought us a big pot of soup. It looked good. It smelled good. Then my mom stirred the soup, and a big, greasy, bristly mass of meat rose to the surface. It was ox tail soup. I'm pretty sure I blurted out, "What *is* this stuff?" I'm also pretty sure I boycotted dinner that night.

"What *is* this stuff?" is precisely the question the Israelites ask in Exodus 16. Morning comes in the wilderness, the dew lifts and there on the ground lies a fine, flaky substance, "as fine as frost" (Exodus 16:14). It doesn't look like grain. It doesn't resemble bread. It doesn't grow from anything they know. It simply appears. So, they ask one another, "What is it?" Moses answers, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat" (Exodus 16:15).

The trouble is, this stuff doesn't look like bread, which is one of the delicious ironies of the story. The Israelites complain that they are dying of starvation, so God Door Dashes them some manna, but they don't recognize it as food, much less as God's grace. *This newness isn't accidental; it's intentional*. God does not give them Egyptian bread in the wilderness or any of the familiar food they had in slavery food. This is wilderness food for wilderness people. God feeds them with something new because they are becoming a new, covenant people.

God's manna carries a double lesson: it is real provision, sustaining, and life-preserving; it is also strange, not what they expected, and it arrives in a form they don't recognize. This is often how God "feeds" us. We pray for help, and the help doesn't resemble what we imagined. We ask for strength, and what arrives looks suspiciously like a weakness. We hope for clarity, and what we receive is a small, next step. We want security, and God gives us something like an existential crisis. Our first response, is to wrinkle the nose of the soul and ask: "What *is* this stuff?" Exodus 16 is not just a story about bread in the wilderness; it is a story about recognition, or rather misrecognition, when God places real provision before us in forms we don't yet know how to name.

One of the striking features of Exodus 16 is that Israel's complaint comes *after* deliverance but *before* stability. The people are no longer enslaved. The threat of Pharaoh is gone. The Red Sea opened and swallowed their enemies, and they are safe on the far shore. Freedom is achieved, but freedom is not yet security. The Israelites are stuck in-between: no longer in Egypt, not yet in the promised land. No longer slaves; not yet settled in a new life. Hunger arrives in that in-between space. Uncertainty and fear flood the soul. Anxiety begins to edit the past. "If only we

had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt," they lament, "when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread" (Exodus 16:3).

This is an astonishing statement when you consider what Egypt *really* was! Forced labor. Unrealistic quotas. Brutal whippings. Mass genocide. Their hunger romanticizes what was, and the Israelites interpret the present through panic: "You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3). This is why God's response is so revealing. God doesn't lecture them or refer to their wretched ingratitude. God says, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you" (Exodus 16:4). That bread doesn't arrive in the form of a warm Egyptian pita. No familiar loaves, no recognizable flatbread; just a fine, flaky substance nobody has ever seen before.

This manna is real, and it will sustain them for 40 years; but in the moment of arrival, it is misrecognized. "What is it?" This is more than a culinary question: it is an existential one. What is this new thing God is doing? What is this unfamiliar means of survival? What is this life that doesn't look like the one we knew? What Israel encounters isn't just new food: it is a new mode of dependence. In Egypt, food came through the machinery of the empire: fields, irrigation, storage, distribution, forced labor, an industry designed and managed (ironically) by their ancestor Joseph. It was predictable, measurable, controlled. You could see where bread came from, even if the system oppressed you to produce it.

In the wilderness, bread arrives daily; not stockpiled, but unpredicted and unmanageable. Manna can't be grown, engineered, or accumulated: *It can only be received*. The most comforting truth in this passage may be that God's provision in our lives doesn't depend on our ability to recognize it immediately. We are often sustained by graces and mercies we have not yet learned how to name. Only later, looking back, does Israel understand. Only later in Deuteronomy does it say, "[God] fed you in the wilderness with manna...in order to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good" (Deuteronomy 8:16). What felt strange and unfamiliar proved to be life-giving and exactly what they needed. Our first question is naturally, "What is this stuff?" Genuine faith asks a follow-up question: "Might this be God's provision in a form I don't yet recognize?" Sometimes the very thing that feels unlike what we expected is the thing that keeps us alive when we find ourselves languishing in our own personal wilderness.

Once the people begin gathering this strange bread, Exodus introduces one of the most quietly radical economic statements in the Bible. "This is what the Lord has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs"; and then, this interesting comment: "Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much

as each of them needed” (Exodus 16:16, 18). *The wilderness runs on an economy of sufficiency.* There is enough for everyone. There is no need to amass, hoard, or stockpile for a rainy day. Some gather more. Some gather less. Different needs, different family sizes, different capacities; yet when measured, every household has enough. No one ended the day hungry. Call it the principle of *enough-ness*. God gives in such a way that each person receives enough.

Sadly, we live inside a different economy: *the economy of more*. We think more is safer. More is wiser. More is responsible. More means security against tomorrow. More means less anxiety. We measure well-being not by sufficiency but by surplus. God’s manna defies that logic. It arrives daily. Manna is perishable, non-accumulative, and precisely portioned, so there is no need for storehouses. This is a hunger-alleviation program calibrated to the day and to the person! Jesus later taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our *daily* bread” (Matthew 6:11). This is manna language: daily, not stored; enough, not excess. This runs counter to the logic of the world which worries if we will have enough for tomorrow.

In the wilderness, Israel experiences scarcity: no agriculture, no supply chain, no visible food source. No Costco, no Walmart, no Aldi. They discover that God isn’t in the bulk food business, and it feels inefficient, risky, and uncomfortable; but their daily dependence on God’s provision keeps trust alive. If God dropped a year’s supply of bread in one spectacularly generous gesture, the people would relax into storage management. Daily manna keeps them relationally tethered to God. Each morning requires regathering and a rediscovery of God’s grace.

Here again the text brushes close to our own lives because most of us have gone through hard times when God’s provision doesn’t look abundant by our cultural standards. Sometimes it looks barely adequate and downright modest. Just enough energy to survive. Just enough money to get by. Just enough clarity to function. Just enough strength to take the next step. The temptation is to *interpret adequacy as deficiency*. This is why Exodus quietly reframes the question. The measure is not, “Do I need more?” The measure is, “Do I have enough for the day God has given me?” God does not feed Israel with excess. God feeds them with *enough*.

Manna teaches that God provides enough. Manna also teaches that enough cannot be secured by hoarding. Moses is explicit: “Let no one leave any of it over until morning” (Exodus 16:19). Gather what you need and no more. It sounds simple, but these are people living in a food-insecure environment. Wilderness survival runs on storage. Sensible people stockpile, plan, and hedge against uncertainty. So, the Israelites keep a little back; but to their surprise, in the morning the saved manna is wormy and rotten. Yesterday’s attempt at security decayed overnight. What was meant to protect, now repels. The stored gift spoils because manna is not

something we possess, but rather an expression of our relationship with God. Daily bread requires daily trust in the One who provides it.

Like the Israelites, we are rarely anxious about today alone. We worry about continuity and whether our good fortune will continue. We attempt to store what cannot be stored: reassurance, certainty, and sufficiency. We gather emotional reserves, financial buffers, or strategic guarantees. None of these are inherently wrong. Prudence has its place, but manna forces us to ask, “Where, ultimately, does security rest?” The Israelites’ hoarding isn’t greed in the usual sense: *It is fear*. The spoiled manna teaches that God’s provision is meant to be received and cannot be secured by acting like pack rats.

This leads directly to the Sabbath instruction: On the sixth day, you may gather twice as much. For the first time, excess is permitted, even commanded; and this time the stored portion doesn’t spoil. It sustains through the seventh day, when no manna appears. On the seventh, the people gather nothing but eat what was given before, which means the day of rest relies on provision already supplied. Sabbath institutionalizes trust. We live in a greedy culture that equates security with control and rest with risk. To stop gathering feels irresponsible. To cease accumulating feels exposed. To live one day on what is already enough feels dangerous. Yet Exodus insists that the Lord gives the Sabbath as a gift, and God provides food for two days.

The Israelites struggle with this. Some go out on the seventh day anyway, scanning the ground, searching for manna that isn’t there. The old fear-of-missing-out reflex persists: if I don’t gather, I’ll starve. But there isn’t any manna because manna was never about endless availability; it was about learned dependence. Six days of receiving. One day of trusting what is already given. Israel is being weaned from the accumulation of possessions and being trained into a rhythm where enough is given, trust is practiced, and rest is possible. The wilderness diet isn’t only about feeding bodies; it’s also about feeding souls.

The deeper invitation of manna is not merely to notice God’s provision or even to accept its sufficiency, but to loosen our grip on the instinct that says, “I must secure tomorrow for myself.” God promises to provide what we need. This strange stuff is bread. This daily portion is enough. This un-hoard-able gift will sustain you in the wilderness you now inhabit. God doesn’t always feed us with what fed us before; the forms change as we change. The provision fits the journey we are on, not the one we left behind. What we get is wilderness food for wilderness people.

This brings us back, in a way, to that childhood dinner table. The plate is set before you, but something unfamiliar rests there. It doesn’t resemble what you wanted, it doesn’t match what you remember, and it doesn’t look like nourishment as you would define it. Yet, over time, you

discover that it sustains you, strengthens you, and carries you farther than you ever imagined it could. It turns out to be — quietly, stubbornly — good. *What is this stuff?* It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. Enough for today. Un-hoard-able, yet reliable. Strange at first yet sustaining. Given morning by morning to people who are still learning how to live free.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, just as You rained down manna from heaven to feed the Israelites in the wilderness, I ask for Your provision in my life today. You know my financial needs, my bills, and my anxieties. Grant me daily bread. Help me to trust that You will provide for tomorrow when tomorrow comes and give me peace in Your absolute faithfulness. Amen.

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