

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 10
July 28, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
What is it?

On the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt, the entire Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai. ²The entire Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat around pots of meat and ate as much food as we wanted, but now you have brought us out into this wilderness to have this whole community die of hunger.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “Watch what I will do. I will rain down bread from heaven for you, and the people will go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test whether they will follow my instructions or not. ⁵On the sixth day they will prepare what they bring in, and it will be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “At evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you will see the Glory of the LORD, because he has heard your constant grumbling against the LORD. Who are we that you should grumble against us?”

⁸Moses said, “Now the LORD will give you meat to eat in the evening and as much bread as you want in the morning, because the LORD has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Tell the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling.’” ¹⁰As Aaron spoke to the entire Israelite community, they turned toward the wilderness, and suddenly the Glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses: ¹²“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Say to them, ‘At evening you will eat meat, and in the morning you will eat bread until you are full. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³So in the evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning a layer of dew surrounded the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew was gone, there were thin flakes on the surface of the wilderness, thin as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” because they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread which the LORD has given to you as food to eat.

—Exodus 16:1-15

Mom rings the dinner bell. All family members emerge from different areas of the house. They take to their seats, anticipating the savory meal with an aroma that wafts to their nostrils. After joining together to thank the Lord for the meal that is before them, mom lifts the cover off the porcelain pot. One by one she serves the food, each person getting just enough. As she places the meal before the youngest in the household, he looks down. He stares at what is on his plate. And without giving thought to how his words will sound, he blurts, “What is it?”

What is it? That’s a good question. I suppose there are all sorts of different answers that mom could give. “It’s your supper. It’s meat. It’s protein. It’s food to give you energy.” But is it more?

In our household we begin each meal with a prayer. “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And let these gifts to us be blessed. Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for he is good; for his mercy endures forever.” But is that just a formality? Is that prayer something to quickly race through so that we can get to the good stuff? Or do we say that prayer because we recognize that there is something more as we look at those physical blessings?

Today I would like to encourage you to look at your physical blessings, the meal on your plate, the clothes on your body, the car in your garage. And as you look at those physical blessings, ask the question, “What is it?” Look beyond what you visibly see. What do you see beyond those things?

Things are what the people of Israel saw. Oh, it wasn’t the only thing they saw. They saw strife; back-breaking strife. They felt the whip of the taskmasters. They knew a hard life under the imposing rule of the Pharaoh of Egypt. But the LORD intervened to save his people from that painful situation. He pulled up his sleeves and set his people free.

They saw salvation. One plague after another – the LORD picking off one Egyptian god after another as if a single elimination tournament. The Israelite people, God’s people, walked out of Egypt with loads of food and goods from the Egyptians. God had given his people salvation.

They saw serenity. Even though it was a chaotic time as God walked his people across the Red Sea, they made it to the other side. God's people could look back. They saw the waves gently lapping on the shore with their vengeful enemies buried under the water.

Oh, the people, God's people, saw a lot. They saw the LORD their God safely rescue them from the oppressive Egyptians. They saw the LORD their God lead them out of Egypt with the goal of leading them to the Promised Land. They saw the LORD their God's gracious heart take them by the hand to lead them safely.

But after just one month of camping in the wilderness, things begin to change. The food supply is diminishing. They look at the rations and wonder "What's next?" The people stand at a crossroads. They look back; they look ahead.

What do they see? They look in the rearview mirror, but instead of looking at the hand of the LORD their God rescuing them, instead of seeing the gracious salvation of their God, they longed for death by the LORD's hand. ***"If only we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat around pots of meat and ate as much food as we wanted, but now you have brought us out into this wilderness to have this whole community die of hunger."***

Is that really what God had intended? Did he really save them from death by plague in order to bring them to death by plight? Did they really think the LORD their God was leading them out of Egypt to starve them in the desert? Was that their end? Had they forgotten the saving acts of their God? Is God's arm too short to take care of them day by day? Does he only roll up his sleeves to part the water of the Red Sea? But is it too much for the Lord to take care of them now?

Oh, foolish Israelites! Oh, shortsighted Israelites! No. Oh, forgetful us. The car needs some repairs. We are swimming in medical bills. The children need braces. And what comes from our mouths? "Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever?" Is that what gushes over our lips? Or is it murmuring and muttering, grouching and grumbling?

Why is it that we so often focus on what we do not have in our lives instead of on our God who has us? Why do we look at our houses and investments, our cars and campers and mutter, "I'm barely surviving; I can't give to the Lord?" Is it ingratitude? Is it misplaced priorities? Is it that we can't properly see?

The Israelites are standing in the shadow of God's saving act. But what do they see? They focus on what they think they lack. They do not see the LORD who is their God. So murmuring and muttering, grumbling and grouching flow from their lips.

But grace flows from the lips of the LORD. He speaks to Moses, ***"Watch what I will do. I will rain down bread from heaven for you, and the people will go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test whether they will follow my instructions or not. On the sixth day they will prepare what they bring in, and it will be twice as much as they gather on the other days."***

What grace! What love! In the midst of the people's grumbling, God graciously gives grace. "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. I will give. I will provide. I will take care of you, my people."

But what is it ... what is it that the Lord wanted the people to see? Did he want them to see that he could handle even the little things of their lives? Did he want them to see that he loved them with an everlasting love? Did he want them to see that he was capable of providing for their needs? Yes. A thousand times yes.

But more. Look beyond the visible. Look beyond the food on the plate; the car in the garage; the home on the lot. What is it? The Lord your God wants you to see something more. He wants you to see something behind the visible.

"So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'At evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the Glory of the LORD, because he has heard your constant grumbling against the LORD.... 'The LORD spoke to Moses: 'I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Say to them, 'At evening you will eat meat, and in the morning you will eat bread until you are full. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"

"I am the LORD your God. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt." As they would take a bite from that juicy meat in the evening and feel the flakey bread melt on their tongue in the morning, the LORD wanted them to see him. And is he everything we need?

Our hearts crave so much. We desire things that do not last. But what does our gracious God want us to see? We need someone that will fill our greatest wants and needs. We need someone that will fill us forever.

And grace upon grace, we have someone who can and does do just that. His name is Jesus. He is the LORD, your God. And he is the answer for all your burning needs.

After receiving their fill of bread and fish, another generation of Israelites crossed a sea in order to look for Jesus. It's the sequel to the Gospel for today. The people had their fill. Their stomachs were satisfied. But it did not last. In pursuit of Jesus they wanted to know what Jesus would do for them. Would he give them more for their bodies? Would he

supply their physical cravings? In John 6, the people said to Jesus, ***“So what miraculous sign are you going to do, that we may see it and believe you? What miraculous sign are you going to perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”*** Jesus said to them, ***“Amen, Amen, I tell you: Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the real bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”*** ***“Sir,” they said to him, “give us this bread all the time!”*** ³⁵ ***“I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus told them. “The one who comes to me will never be hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty.”*** (John 6:30-35)

In a few weeks we will have a sermon series on the Bread of Life, but doesn't this sound great? No more hunger. No more thirst. It sounds so wonderful. No more bills. No more expenses. Such wonderful promises, but even more!

No more guilt. No more sin. Jesus is the food we need for our souls. The enemy chases us down looking to force us under his tyrannical whip. Jesus has defeated him. The Passover Lamb's blood has been shed setting us free from sin's slavery. We stand on the banks of the water and look back. The baptismal waters gently lap on the shore, and you know that your enemy has been drowned. The LORD is your God. He has rescued you.

That's what the LORD wanted his people to remember in the desert. As he brought them the meat in the evening and bread in the morning, as he gave them physical blessings, he wanted them to look beyond what they saw. He wanted them to see him. He is the LORD who brought them out of Egypt. He is the LORD their God.

Did they see that? Did they see what was behind those visible blessings? ***“When the layer of dew was gone, there were thin flakes on the surface of the wilderness, thin as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” because they did not know what it was.”***

What is it? They still did not see. Oh, sure, they were confused at the meal on their plate. But that's the problem. They were simply focusing on the visible, physical thing. ***“Moses said to them, “This is the bread which the LORD has given to you as food to eat.”*** The LORD gave it.

Look ahead, people of Israel. You are not going back to Egypt. The LORD brought you out of Egypt. Look ahead. The LORD is leading you to the Promised Land. It's your home. God promised. And certainly he will take care of you on that journey.

Look ahead, people of Emmanuel Lutheran Church. You are not going back to slavery. Look ahead. The LORD is leading you to the Promised Land. It's your home. God promised. And certainly he will take care of you on that journey.

And when the final dinner bell rings, we will emerge from various places in this world. We will take to our seats around the banquet table of heaven. We won't look down and mutter, “What is it?” For we will know. We will know. Never again will we hunger. Never again will we thirst. For Jesus has always been the daily bread for our souls. Amen.