

Sermon by Jane Larsen-Wigger
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church
September 21, 2008

Exodus 16:1-15
Matthew 20:1-16
Psalm 105

*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*
(Psalm 63:1)

Last week at this time we heard the story of the Israelites walking through the sea on dry land. As the Bible tells it, "The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land. . .the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, so the waters formed a wall for them on their right and on their left." (Exodus 14:21, 22) I'm sure I wasn't the only one wondering if a wind was really that powerful. If that indeed could happen.

And then we walked out of here, right out into some mighty winds, and into a very tumultuous week. Besides the havoc here in River City, there was plenty of havoc on Wall Street as well. All of it has left people reeling a bit.

Things we count on, indeed have come to depend on greatly, just haven't been there. So much was just thrown to the wind this week - literally and figuratively. So, sort of like the Israelites, we've been kind of wandering in a wilderness – disoriented, nervous, wondering what's going to happen to us.

Let's see what happened to them, our ancestors in the faith:

Read Exodus 16:1-15

Maybe you've heard the story about the guy from up north somewhere who was traveling through the South. He stops at a little café one morning and orders breakfast: 2 eggs over easy, bacon, toast, and hash browns. When his order arrives all that is there. But there's also, on the side, a little bowl of some pasty, lumpy, white stuff. He calls the server back and points to the bowl:

"What is this?" he asks.

"Grits." he's told.

"But, I didn't order grits."

She just looks at him. "Honey, you don't order grits. You just get grits."

"What is this?" That's basically the same question that we hear in both of our texts for

today. "What IS it?"

Can't you just hear those laborers that Matthew was describing? "What IS this?" We've been out here all day, worked our tails off, and you're gonna pay these that have only worked AN HOUR the same as us?" What IS this?

Whatever it is, it sure doesn't fit with a Protestant Work Ethic. It's like someone being hired today for the very same job you've been doing all year, and at the end of the year you both have the same salary reported to the IRS. It's like people who got free food this week just because they're on food stamps, when other hard-working people had to throw spoiled food out too. Or maybe a little? like a football stadium or a golf course seeming to get preferential treatment when thousands of regular homes and businesses are still without power.

What IS this?

This is the same question those Hebrews in the wilderness were asking too. Here they are...finally free from Egyptian rule and slavery. And what do they do? Complain. Or, the translation I prefer: they murmur. "We're hungry. What are we gong to eat?"

You see, before – back in Egypt, sure they were slaves. But at least they ate. Did a full day's work. The food was there. Now, here they are in this new place with nary a job in sight let alone a field to harvest. They don't really know what to do. How are they going to eat? Are a bit disoriented.

So they cry to Moses who cries to God. And then, this strange flaky white stuff starts falling out of the sky. They had no idea what it was. Hence, their question: "What is it?" In fact, the name for that flaky white stuff – manna—is a play on their words: because the Hebrew for "What is it?" is man-hu. Manna.

Manna – something that doesn't quite 'fit' into our system, into our idea of how things are, into our understanding of fairness. It doesn't meet our expectations. Manna. "God's graceful response to an ungrateful and even rebellious people." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, page 143)

"What is it?" It is grace. "The gift of manna in the wilderness is a story of grace. Israel is threatened by starvation, and God responds with bread from heaven." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*) They haven't earned it. In fact, all they've done is whine. And the generous payment of the folks who only worked one hour? Again: grace. It wasn't punishment for those who worked longer...they got exactly what they had agreed to. Which was probably, in fact, a very fair wage. Those all-day workers were not harmed in the least. It was just that the others were shown grace.

So, why is it so hard to take? Why do we have such a problem with grace – not just for others? But even for ourselves?

I happen to live in one of the few houses around that did not lose electricity this week. I spent most of the week feeling a bit guilty about it. And then yesterday at our presbytery meeting, Kathy Lancaster, our presbytery moderator, was asking for a show of hands of who still did not have electricity. About half the folks there raised their hands. Then she assured the rest of us that she wasn't going to make us raise our hands if we did indeed have power. "But," she said, "I hope you can accept and enjoy that gift of grace – without guilt!"

Kathy knows that we church folks may have a problem accepting grace - even, maybe especially? for ourselves. "For all our talk of grace, the church still has trouble with it." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*) Because, let's be honest: forgiveness and generosity do not seem fair. And we have such a sense of fairness. Maybe it's a hold over from childhood. Surely you've heard—or been--a young child crying when their sibling receives something they themselves didn't get? Or even got the same thing even though the other hadn't earned it in some way. "It's not fair!" is the child's cry! And how many parents have been heard to reply: "Well, life's not fair." In other words: get used to it, kid.

These stories we heard from the Bible today take that thinking even further. Make ya wonder if maybe God isn't "fair." And we just have to get used to it! "The generosity of God often cuts across our calculations of who deserves what." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*)

And for all our talk about it, God's grace is still as strange to us as grits are to a Yankee. Because our focus – so often– is on what we do, what we earn; what we order or deserve or are willing to pay for. But the focus in Jesus' parable is really not on the workers and what they did or did not do. The attention is on what the landowner did. The focus is not the merit of the workers, but the extravagant goodness of the owner. And in the Exodus story: again, the focus isn't so much on the whining, untrusting, ungrateful people who have just miraculously been freed from an awful and enslaving situation – but the focus is on the Holy One who so fully provides for them – in spite of their lack of trust. In spite of their "faithless murmurs." (From a hymn)

And what God provides - well, that is greater than what can be imagined, greater than what is deserved, greater than what can be earned. It's something of a surprise – something that doesn't fit human categories of fairness and duty and responsibility.

"What is it?"

The bread the Lord has given isn't the regular white sliced Wonder bread we might expect. In fact, it was unrecognizable to the Hebrews as it literally came out of heaven. They didn't know what this was – or why they needed it. They certainly didn't recognize it as a gift from God- at least at first.

In spite of all WE do, the one thing that really matters is what God does – and God will be generous and good beyond all our expectations. It's not up to us. If we can just get out

of that old way of thinking, we can actually begin to notice some of the surprises of God's amazing grace.

There are a couple of clues within this story of the Manna in the wilderness that I think are helpful in doing that - in moving our attention away from what we do, what we've earned, what we deserve – and help us start to see a bit better what God is doing; help us recognize grace when it hits us.

First is the little tidbit in here about God providing enough manna each day. They don't have to worry about hoarding it. Don't have to fear that God will forget them. There is the promise that God will provide the grace we need each and every day. If that's the case, maybe we just need to be looking for it, living as if that promise is true. Interestingly, with the loss this week of a lot of the 'regular' things we have come to depend upon in this culture, it seemed as if people were looking at ordinary things in new ways. I was struck that every day I heard a story about how someone had been touched by something graceful and good:

Neighbors banded together to help each other.

Pot-lucks brought people together at one woman's house each night.

A couple of college roommates engaged in actual conversation rather than just clicking away back to back at their computers.

A church fed anyone in the neighborhood – for free.

And how about the sheer gift of email being limited?!

Grace was abundant this week. But, maybe it always is - and we just were less distracted this week so could—and did—look for it. And, I'm guessing, whether it was recognized or not, there was enough grace each day to see you through. A time to remember that we don't order grace, we just get grace.

The other thing in this story that I think is worth mentioning is the importance of the Sabbath. This will not be the last time that the Hebrew people—and we—hear about how essential a day of rest is. Whether you're caught up in storm-related stresses or just every day life issues, there is power in stopping. Stopping to remember that it is NOT all up to you. Stopping to re-focus attention toward what God might actually be doing. Stopping, in order to look closely and expectantly – in order to recognize the gifts of God's grace falling all around us.