

Our Hunger, His Hope

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Exodus 16:2-3, 13-18; John 6:25 – 35; 49 -51

We human beings, like all other creatures in God's world, are born hungry. Human babies, like puppies, kittens, colts, calves, once thrust into the world, are very soon about the business of opening their mouths and filling themselves.

Very seldom do they need teaching. Obviously babies come into the world not knowing much, but they do come – WE ALL CAME –knowing hunger and blindly opening our mouths in order that our hunger might be met.

Picture us then like scraggly hatchlings in a nest, our eager mouths waiting to be filled. Something in the human being remains in this posture, especially this time of year.

From November 27 through January 1, most of us live with our mouths full – holiday stuffing, treats, goodies, sugarplums of many varieties. Are you waddling in here today with the crumbs of feasting dinners and the overflow of leftovers still fresh on your taste buds? I am. There is an ad company that is even now working on a word to define that Thanksgiving overflow feeling. But it is not just our plates which are piled high for holiday season; we also pile high our hopes. Advent – the yearning for Christmas -- reminds us how full we have been made and also how hungry we still are.

I.

One thing scripture makes very clear is the God who created us all hungry is also the God who wants us to have the gift of food. In Psalm 131, the Psalmist compares God to a human mother nursing a young child: "Oh Lord...you have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at his mother's breast (Psalm 131:2). In Genesis, part of God's covenant with the first man and the first woman is to make sure that in the garden, there is everything they need to eat. And then in this passage from Exodus 16 is Israel's unforgettable experience in the wilderness learning what a gracious provider God is. Out in the desert they are wandering with great uncertainty – people desperately needed food – and their hungry stomachs begin to do the talking. They began to wish for their return to "the fleshpots of Egypt", wishing in fact that they had died in Egypt. "At least we had enough to eat," they complained. They are longing for the "bread of bondage" and security.

Then, with one life-changing sunrise, God astonished them when he made a dining hall of the desert (Exodus 16:12 – 16). He showered them with funny-looking white bread, sweet like honey, the scripture says. Bread called "Ma na" – Ma Na, made from two Hebrew words, "What's that?" Can you imagine the first Israelite stumbling bleary-eyed out of the tent on the morning it first fell? He sees white, flakey, bread covering the ground like dew and says "ma na?" What's that?

We are not that much removed when we, after pleading our hungers away to God, see God's unexpected response. In facing God's answers to our life petitions and complaints, have we found ourselves, eyes up, mouth open, in quizzical tone – "hey God, what's that? Is this an answer to my prayers?"

So for forty years in the wilderness, Israelites sat down to breakfast and said "Pass the 'what's that'." For forty years, as generations were born and grew, as old men died, they woke up to 'what's that' – Manna was provided daily (for 6 days) ... JUST enough to last until the next meal.

"What's that?", the curious Israelite asks one morning, full of wonder for the strange feast."I don't know," someone answers, "but God just puts it here FOR US – and it's good and it's enough."

It is that same sense of wonder for the unexplainable gift that caused Jesus to pray with confidence for daily bread and to stress that such a gift is **shared**. "Give us this day our daily bread..." Then he does -- with five loaves and two fish and 5000 hungry mouths to feed. And this is not the end of the miracle. There are thanksgiving leftovers that would put the Pilgrims to shame. Twelve baskets?-what's that? God just put it here for us; and it is enough. Unexplainable gift.

We are full of wonder for the strange feast. It is the same sense of wonder that causes us to pause and breathe thanks before we eat ... the Thanksgiving dinner prayer when family hands are held around a table for the first time in a year, recently healed hands hold newborn fingertips, the returning collegiate clasps the waiting younger brother, the missing spouse, the surly child, the circle of gratitude – eyes closed, mouths open, receiving a gift of God. Ma na – God put it here... good and just enough.

We are full of wonder for the strange feast of God's great provision when we feed others. Your offerings are the Ma na that is God's gift in wilderness hearts around the world. The Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger will feed hungry people in modern day deserts in Texas and on every continent in the world. "Ma na? What's that?" Voices in 100 languages ask what is this gift of farm or food or working wage for a day's labor? What's that? "I DON'T KNOW... too generous to be explained," they say. It must be God's unexplainable gift. God just put it here for us; it is good and it is enough. God's gift is maybe more of a blessing when we give it as well as receive it.

It is no miracle to feed the world today. It is a matter of will. Our willingness to be partners with a kingdom assignment from Jesus: "Feed my sheep." For the cost of one meal, once a month, we can be the miracle for so many on every continent.

But don't think twice - we have a NASTY habit of procrastinating. Have you seen the ad campaign for the "I-almost-gave.com" or the "I-had-good-intentions-but-never-followed-through.com"? Whatever else we know of the complaining Israelites, they could wander the wilderness for forty years, look God straight in the eye and miss the point.

So can we. So here's a small step towards an unexplainable gift – a Texas-shaped bank for World Hunger. I'll start one at the front of each section; you pass them back and put in some change or dollars

or a check. We will start today to put an end to hunger with the habit of a small unexplainable gift. But please, don't be a member of "I-was-hungry-and-you-almost-fed-me.com" !

Just as a reminder - 3.9 million Texans live below the poverty rate; 2.6 million people in the state experience shortages of food; 1 million experience hunger. These statistics are based on percentages from a national survey conducted by the US Department of Agriculture.

The cost of one meal, once a month – Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger.

II.

Truth is, not all our hungers are satisfied, are they? We have different levels of hunger – some levels are easier to feed than others. We all have physical appetites – food, drink, warmth, shelter, sexual fulfillment. And we also have deep hungers of the heart – companionship, security, peace of mind. Deeper still, at the very center of who we are, stirs the most crucial relentless hunger of all – a very deep yearning, gnawing ---for what?--- Words sometimes fail us.

Should we call it craving in everything to be fully known, yet fully loved? Should we call it the soul's deep hungering for perfect peace? Is it a hunger to be powerfully alive? Is this our hunger for God? We all have a strong case of being hungry in our souls, and it drives us.

It drives some of us to church; it drives some of us crazy; it drives some to addictions and some to devotion. Most troubling of all, this driving, gripping hunger in us gets connected and confused with all our other appetites. Feeling the ache at the deep center of our lives, we regularly try to fill it with the pursuit of other desires. Some try with food, or sex, or substance abuse, loud laughter, high achievement, the esteem of others. Some gorge on goodness, some gorge on perfection, some gorge on guilt. Some, like vultures, gorge on the fallenness of others. And some become so tortured by the gnawing inside that living becomes a mad rush to devour just about anything to fill the space.

III.

After the feeding of the five thousand, many from the crowd followed Jesus to the next stop. They came back for day two of a free giveaway, and he calls them out on it. In John 6:26, "You are looking for me...not because you saw signs, but because you ate the fill of the loaves." They reminded Jesus, "Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness." Maybe they were angling for forty years of free lunches. But Jesus answers them in verse 49. "Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread of heaven that has come down from heaven so that you may not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." We are in awe of this strange and wondrous feast for the soul.

So the God who made us physically hungry and plans for us to be filled with physical food provides for our deepest hunger through the unexplainable gift of Jesus Christ. On this Sunday we are stepping on the welcome mat of Advent – Christmas is coming. The serious business of God is incarnation, God-with-us...“Emmanuel.” God gets into the hungering world - a world hungry for food and hungry for so much more.

The hunger that cannot be met by substance, experience, or achievement, no grasping or gorging can fill it. This hunger is met in person by God-with-us...“Emmanuel.” He is not like the passive, lifeless things we find and grasp and gobble down. He is alive; he comes to meet us, to commune with us, to befriend us and to fill us with friendship and love – love all lit up in action for others.

God shows up – in Bethlehem. The shepherds come by Bethlehem – they look over into a feeding trough and say “Ma na? What’s that?” Jesus is born in Beth –le- hem, This is Hebrew for “House of Bread”. So when Jesus says of himself, “I am the living bread,” he means it on so many levels. There in a stable, the very life of God is wrapped in a baby’s flesh. He cries out with human hunger. He is nestled to his mother, receives his food and when full, his mother kisses him and places him in, of all things, a feed box. And we who are so hungry for a perfect love to fill us with joy can do no better than gather around this child to be fed everyday.

And like manna, it will be enough.