

Manna

So I learned an interesting little tidbit this week. It's a little weird, and it isn't a crucial part of the message, but I'll share it anyway.

Manna apparently still exists. In 1968 a botany professor explored the Sinai desert. He discovered a white flaky substance on the branches of a common middle eastern shrub. When he asked what it was, a local Bedouin told him it was manna.

You can find manna in both the Middle East and Italy... maybe other Mediterranean regions as well. I found manna for sale on an Italian online store, only Italian manna is produced from a kind of ash tree. At the Manna restaurant in the Museum of the Bible in Washington DC, the chef has experimented with using manna as a garnish.

Manna is produced when insects burrow into certain trees and eat the sap. They then excrete a fine flaky sweet substance that is apparently very much like what the Bible describes. It is typically deposited during the night from Spring to early fall. So in effect, it does seem to appear out of nowhere overnight.

So, when the Israelites awoke that morning, saw this flaky stuff all around and asked, What is it? Is the answer essentially bug poop?

I don't know. I don't suppose we really can know. It could have been. Such things serve to take some of the mystery out of the biblical story. They demythologize it. Some people find that very helpful. The notion that there could be scientific explanations for some of the miracles and supernatural events in the Bible helps some people get past their disbelief. There's a whole show we watched once with a group of friends that offered up possible scientific explanations for the Ten Plagues and the parting of the sea in Exodus.

I generally find the different hypotheses and findings interesting...my first love was science after all. But they usually fall short.

Take manna for example. Even if the insect theory is true, it still doesn't account for the fact that if they took even a bit more than a day's ration, it would turn moldy and smell bad, but on the Sabbath they could take two days' worth and it would keep.

In the end, there will always be an element of mystery. And honestly, when the alternative is bug poop, maybe mystery isn't so bad.

What's more important than a scientific explanation, more important really even than whether all these stories are factually true, is what they tell us about the God Israel knew.

So, what does this story does tell us about God?

First of all, as we said last week, God heard the cries of the people as they languished in slavery. With Moses as a partner, God got Pharaoh to let them go, split the waters of the sea so they could get across, drowned the Egyptian army bearing down on them, and got them safely to Sinai.

Now they just want to go back to Egypt. Now, to be fair, they're hungry. And prospects for food don't look great in the wilderness, but c'mon man! God parted the dang sea! Surely they could have a little more faith than that!

Nonetheless, God hears their complaints. So, that's the first thing we learn about God in this story – God listened to the Israelites every time. God hears when people cry out and complain. God listens to our laments and cries...even our grumbling and whining.

So God gives them food. That's the second thing we learn about God. God provides.

God provides food...God provides a way through the wilderness.

In a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, God leads them. God will provide a set of laws to help them live in this new life of freedom.

Next thing we learn is that God provides enough. People always want to botch that by hoarding. As I alluded to earlier, some of the people did try to hoard the manna. But when they took more than they could eat in a day, whatever was left over at the end of the day was moldy and smelly the next morning...except on the sabbath, when it would last exactly two days.

We learn that God is patient. The Israelites' wish to go back to slavery may have made God's eyes roll...just a tinge. But God gave them what they needed to go on. This will be a 40 year sojourn through the Sinai wilderness. God's patience will be tested again and again.

And when the people lose faith and build their own golden calf god, God does patience. But Moses is able to talk God down. That's the other thing we learn about God. God is a God who can be persuaded...God is a God in true partnership with humans.

And God is a God of mystery. Even if we explain away manna.

All these things continue to be true about God now. God hears our cries. When we cry to God about our frustrations and sorrows over the pandemic, God hears.

God hears our cries when we are sick or grieving. God hears the cries of the poor. God hears the cries of our black and brown brothers and sisters as they cry for justice. Over and over throughout history, God has acted in our own lives and the lives of communities and nations.

God continues to provide. We look out in the fields this time of year and see the harvest. We see orchards filled with fruit ripe for picking.

But God provides more than just our material needs. God provides a word when we feel alone. Sometimes we need help, and just the right person comes along to help us. God provides guidance through the word and through the Christian community.

And God provides enough. Here's where this gets tricky. Because not everyone has enough. And some people have an obscene amount of wealth. That's not a problem of God's making. If we trust that God truly does provide enough, then it's on us to correct the imbalance, at least to the point where everyone has enough to live.

Most importantly, God provides a way to our freedom in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Israel languished in slavery...in death...for 400 years. This wilderness journey is a journey to resurrection. It's a journey to new life.

Jesus' death and resurrection brings us back to mystery. There are multiple different ways to explain how Jesus' death and resurrection help us. They're called theories of atonement. All of them only get us so far. In the end, it can only be grasped by faith.

That's what we do when we take the bread and wine of communion. Somehow, Christ's body is truly in that little hunk of bread or that little wafer. Christ's blood is truly in that little cup of wine or juice. Even if we decide manna can be explained by bugs, we cannot explain how Christ is present in the bread and wine. It truly is completely mystery. We can only grasp it by faith.

We grasp it when that wafer or bread is placed in our hand. We grasp it when we take that sip of wine. And what we receive is freedom from the bondage to sin. We receive forgiveness. We receive new life...eternal life.

As those elements enter our own bodies, Christ becomes a part of us, physically.

Not only can we not really explain it, when we try to...when we try to take the mystery out of it, we end up with a very unsatisfying explanation.

So, the best thing to do is quit trying to explain, let ourselves be enveloped by the mystery, and grasp it in faith, trusting that those seemingly insignificant elements truly are working new life in us.