

“Hangry for God”

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Exodus 16:2-26; John 6:30-51

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Hangry is a word we will not find in the American Heritage Dictionary or in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Hangry is a conflation of two words: hungry and angry. When someone is short-tempered because of they are hungry, they are *hangry*.

(It happens to me far more often than I would choose.)

In Exodus 16, the Israelites were *hangry*.

The just witnessed one the most marvelous acts of God—the Reed Sea split open and they were offered safe passage. God liberated them from Pharaoh’s bondage and oppression in Egypt.

But now their stomachs were churning. They moved into the wilderness, where they could not find enough food. They were starting to feel afraid—was it better to die full in Egypt than to starve in the wilderness?

Even though they made those complaints to Moses and Aaron, God heard the complaints. God responds by telling them to eat the flaky substance that they find on the earth each morning. They will always be enough.

Some people get really caught up trying to describe manna: *What is it?* People will debate its substance and derivation. A better question for us may be: How does God use manna to form people and communities?

The story of manna in the wilderness is a story about identity.

In Egypt, the Israelite’s identity was shamed-based. They were easily disregarded. God heard their cries and delivered them. God is bringing them to a place to make a promise—or a covenant—with them at Mount Sinai. But at this point of the story, they are in an in-between place. They are in a place of transition and change.

I imagine there are people in this congregation know about be these in-between places. They can be times colored by uncertainty. God uses these in-between places to form identity.

Will you be shaped by fear and anxiousness? Or will be you shaped by placing trust in the almighty God? Will you be shaped by placing trust in the God who splits seas for you, provides manna and quail in the wilderness, and promises to be with you always?

This scripture is not just about placing our trust in God day-by-day; it is also about a God who demonstrates that faithfulness to humanity. Just as God claimed the Israelites in Egypt, God claims us and gives us freedom. Sometimes this places us in a wilderness where old identities are taken away from us, and God is forming a new identity.

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Writer Anne Lamott shares about her struggles with bulimia in her memoir *Traveling Mercies*. Her eating disorder so much claimed of her life that she was afraid she was going to die. One day she picked up the yellow pages and called a specialist for eating disorders.

Anne describes her experience the following day in Dr. Rita Grosszmann's office. Anne would describe her behavior and then say, "Don't try to stop me."

She would describe some more: "There is nothing you can do to stop me."

Dr. Grosszmann said, "Okay."

This exchange went on for an hour. Eventually, Dr. Grosszman turned to Anne and said, "I am not going to try to take anything away from you because you will try to get it back." (1)

Sometimes there parts of our lives that we know do not give life, but they take life. We know that there are parts of us that are not nourishing, but depleting. Yet, we do not let them go because they are what we know. The defense mechanisms that make us feel safe. It can be numbs us from the feelings of disappointment. They are how we cope. Sometimes the limitations of the past seem more appealing to us than uncertainty of freedom.

Anne and Rita continued to meet. After a couple of weeks, Dr Grosszman asked Anne what she had for breakfast that morning. She answered, "Cereal."

Rita: "Were you hungry when you ate it?"

Anne: "What do you mean?"

Rita: "I mean, did you experience hunger, and then make breakfast?"

Anne: "I don't really understand what you are asking."

Rita: "Why did you have breakfast?"

Anne: "Because it was breakfast time. I know it's time to eat because it is a meal time."

Rita: "Did you feel hungry?"

Anne stared at her blankly. She didn't know what she was talking about. She had forgotten what it was like to feel hunger.

Her task became to feel hungry again and to nourish herself when she felt hunger. (2)

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When our needs can be met, maybe it is good to feel hunger sometimes. It is good to know that we need something other than ourselves—and that we do have a need for God. We are not self-sufficient; we are not self-contained.

A God who nourishes us is a God who is invested in us. God is so invested in us that God nourishes us with God's own image—both in creation and in Christ. God feeds us God's very self.

To form us a new creation, God sometimes takes things away from us—in a way that counselors, therapists, and friends cannot. This doesn't mean we won't want it to back. Sometimes we will resent God for taking away the things that lie to us. But that is the cost of freedom.

The Israelites were yearning for their old identity because it offered them certainty. It did not require daily trust in God. They are yearning for their old way of life—even though they know it is certain death. The rule of Pharaoh had removed all possibilities from their imagination of life outside of Egypt. Now, they didn't know how to behave. They didn't know what to believe. And most importantly, since they no longer belonged to Pharaoh, they hadn't quite figured out what it meant to belong to God.

What does it mean for you to belong to God?

The Israelites begin answering this question in the wilderness. There is a new economy at work in this wilderness. It is not an economy of production. Pharaoh told the Israelites:

Make more bricks.
You are not good enough.
You don't produce enough.
You should be ashamed.

But thank God that Pharaoh's voice is not God's voice!

Gives thanks that the voice of bondage is not the voice of freedom!

The voice of death is not the voice of life.

God says, "You are mine." I will feed you! You are my children!

In the wilderness, we see an economy of grace. Each morning the Israelites would awake and find the manna on the ground. No matter how much they collected, it would be enough for that day.

Living in an economy of grace means trusting God day by day. Even in the wilderness, the Israelites were asked to continue a practice of Sabbath. Sabbath was a time to rest the earth, the animals, and God's children, but it was also a social identifier. Sabbath meant

that on this day we don't participate in the economy of "not enough." Just like manna, Sabbath is forming an identity in us. It is an act of receiving and sharing in God's own identity. On the sixth day of the week, they can collect food for the seventh day of the week without it spoiling.

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Manna in the wilderness is a story about identity.

You may have heard manna or *man hu* translated as "what is it?" They do not know the substance of this mysterious stuff. Biblical scholar Brevard Childs suggests that it could just as likely mean, "Who is it?" (3)

Who is it that provides this food?
Who is it that you trust?
Who is it that is forming your identity?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus answers this question. Jesus says, "Moses did not give your ancestors bread in the wilderness, that was God. Moses did not give you life that was God. I have come down from heaven. I am the bread of life."

* * *

I am reminded of a friend named Denise.
(She has given me permission to tell this story.)

Denise has lived her life back and forth between Brazil and the United States. While she was living in Sao Palos in her early thirties, she forced herself for eight months not to eat any food that looked "good."

That Easter she traveled to the United States to spend Easter with her family. They went to church. The Lord's Supper was being celebrated. The bread was passed in a basket, and it kept getting closer and closer to her. The bread was passed down her pew, and when a basket of "delicious-looking, non-whole-wheat-fat-free-taste-free bread stopped in front of [her] ... [she] completely froze." She didn't know what to do. For eight months, she'd been forbidding herself from reaching for food that looked tasty.

"The bread of life for you."

On that day, Easter, April 8, 2007, she realized she had an eating disorder.

In addition to seeking help, two things happened next.

First, she began to read and think about communion in a different way. Being a child of a Catholic and a Protestant, communion was confusing anyway. And with her eating disorder, the body is the bread and the bread is the body—and that was overwhelming.

As she read and thought and prayed, she started to see communion as a way to be nourished so that we can “feed the rest of the world.”

Secondly, when she was back in Brazil she was flipping through one her aunt’s magazines and read about a woman in Sao Palo who baked bread as a therapeutic practice. She went and met this woman, and on her 33rd birthday they baked bread together—integrating not just all of the elements of the bread, but all of the elements of her life.

After baking the bread, she went back to Rio Di Janeiro. She went to Pastor Jonas’ apartment.

She handed him the loaf of bread she made that afternoon and said, “I know you have no idea who I am, but you baptized me 33 years ago. Will you serve me communion tonight?”

She started telling him the whole story. She told him about her complicated relationship with bread and communion. Then she told Pastor Jonas “I need to be told that I must nourish myself going forward, and that I must do so in order to turn outward again, away from the disorder in my head, into the disorder in the world.”

He took the bread that she had made, and blessed and broke it. Denise bawled.

* * *

God takes things away from us, and then forms a new identity in us. It is hard. It can be painful. But it is an act of freedom. It is a liberating act of God, and there will be times where we will yearn for the ways of old. Denise shared that she feels 99.99% recovered; there is still that hundredth of a percent.

God takes all sort of things away from us. God takes death from us. God takes shame from us. God takes oppression and bondage from us.

And then God gives us manna. God gives us God’s own identity.

God nourishes. God feeds.

Our new identity is an identity of being bound to one another in Christ. Through manna—through this table—God is forming a new identity in us. All things are being made new.

It is an identity that sends us into the “disorder of the world.”

We are nourished so that we may nourish. We are fed so we may feed.

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Whenever I walk into this sanctuary, I am moved by the words on this communion table: “Has everyone been fed?”

The hunger committee of our presbytery is asking people to take the SNAP challenge. SNAP is the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program that supplements people in need \$4.06 a day for food. What is it like, they are asking, to eat \$4.06 a day for a week? Does that change who we are? Will it change how we nourish?

Later in this service, Ginny will lead us in prayer. This prayer will include the prayer Jesus taught us. We will say together, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Give us just enough bread for today, and give us enough for everyone.

Manna in the wilderness is about identity. We don’t know exactly what manna is, but we do know from whom it comes. We know that it comes the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all life. It comes from a God who chooses to invest in us and hear our cries. It is from a God who comes as bread from heaven.

In this daily bread God is telling God’s people, “Do not fear for you are mine.”

Even though we may be losing our old sensibilities in wilderness, may we see God’s very own identity being formed in each of us.

Endnotes:

- (1) Lamott, Anne. Traveling Mercies. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Pg. 193.
- (2) Ibid. Pgs. 193-194.
- (3) Childs, Brevard. The Book of Exodus, Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974. Pg. 274.

Sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation. Written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.