

## Exodus 16:1-18

This theme of God testing people in the early days of covenant is a little off-putting. Even if one sets aside the presumption from later years that God is all-knowing, it just seems like God is a little insecure, not sure of the people's commitment. But there is another kind of testing, I realized this week—when you want to sort of take the temperature of a group, find out where they're at so that you can work with them more effectively. When I tried out that sense of testing, the story of manna in the wilderness took on a heightened meaning.

The "congregation of the Israelites" had been liberated from Pharaoh approximately six weeks before today's story, according to the timetable in the narrative, and quite an impressive liberation it was. The Red Sea parted for them to cross, and then crashed together to drown Pharaoh's army. Nobody in that moment could doubt that God was capable of great things and that God was on their side. But six weeks in the wilderness will do a lot to take the shine off a miracle that's over. They're thirsty and they're food-insecure, and perhaps worst of all, they don't know where they're going or how long it will take. If anybody had said "40 years" at this point, I for one would have given up right away.

Very understandably, the Israelites complain against Moses and Aaron, perhaps not quite daring to blame God directly. "If only we had died in Egypt where we had regular meals; you've brought us out into the wilderness and we're going to die of hunger." So God says God is going to "test" them: God will rain bread from heaven, enough for each day, and twice on the Sabbath. Aaron relays the news to the people, and "the glory of the Lord" appears to them and tells Moses, "I'll send meat in the evening and bread in the morning, and then you'll know that I am the Lord your God." And what happens? Quails fall to the ground in the evening, and in the

morning there is a fine flaky substance on the ground that turns out to be edible. Voila.

If you think about the “testing” as a sort of temperature-taking of the people, a way of gathering information about how they’re coping, you begin to see what God is up to. The people are so anxious about surviving that they’re even feeling nostalgic about slavery in Egypt. As long as their only alternative to insecurity is the model of oppression and authoritarianism of Egypt, they will never become the community that models God’s New Earth to the rest of the world. God needs to give them a way to think differently about where security comes from. So God provides a reliable but slightly underwhelming source of nutrition.

It reminds me of my friend Carolyn, when she adopted a child from an orphanage in eastern Europe. The little girl was about two, too little to speak, but already traumatized in part by chronic hunger. So Carolyn and her husband laid Cheerios around the edges of all their furniture, so that as the little girl crawled and toddled around, she could always find food. It wasn’t enough to feed her fully, because they *did* feed her three good meals a day. But it was enough to assure her that she could always have food if she needed it.

God is trying to help the people move from a mindset that can only imagine technical changes to being able to imagine—and execute—adaptive change. Technical changes are the ones that you bring about using the tools and know-how you already have, like updating your sacred music so the young people will come back to church. Sometimes technical changes are inadequate to address the problem. Sometimes you need a new paradigm to meet the moment, because the young people are just not going to “come back to church.” If the Israelites are going to grow into the covenant God makes with them, they’re going to need a paradigm of community that does not assume that the two alternatives are a dehumanizing

and oppressive society OR starvation in the wilderness. They are going to have to imagine a third option: the kingdom of God in which there's always enough, and twice as much the day before the Sabbath, so that you can rest. That's adaptive change.

God is shifting their minds from being people who look to Pharaoh for the structure of their days to people who look to God. Now that they're in the wilderness, the last thing they should do is re-create Egypt. God wants them to change from enslaved people into free people, or from anxious people into trusting people.<sup>i</sup>

I'm old enough to remember—and you are too—the anxiety that began to take hold in the “mainline” church in the 1970s and 1980s, when membership began to decline while it soared in conservative evangelical churches. [Actually, this describes the entirety of my professional career.] Some of us thought it'd burn itself out and thinking people would return to us. Others of us thought that if we made our worship services snazzier we'd attract and keep new members, or if we put more resources into summer camp and youth programs, that would stop the bleeding. Many, many technical changes were imagined and tried. But the conservatives kept growing and gaining cultural/political power, until the very brand of “Christian” has become synonymous with values that horrify us, that seem to us to be contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

Now apparently the conservative church is starting to experience its own institutional decline. The magazine *Christianity Today* has started a podcast called “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” (a megachurch) to reflect on the growing ranks of exvangelicals — those who have left white evangelicalism for a different form of faith or for no faith at all.<sup>ii</sup> And Blake Chastain, who invented the term “exvangelical,” recently wrote an article in Religion News Service,

criticizing evangelicals for failing to actually listen to those who leave their ranks.

According to Chastain, evangelical leaders are manufacturing their own self-serving reasons why people are leaving their churches. It's "trendy," or those people never took the faith seriously anyway. But Chastain argues that the departures are painful and heartfelt. He quotes a chaplain named Caitlin Stout:

"A friend asked the other day what percentage of people I went to youth group with 'deconstructed' and what percentage remained evangelical. As I thought about it, I realized that for the most part it was the kids who took their faith the most seriously who eventually walked away. Those of us who tearfully promised that we would follow Jesus anywhere eventually followed him out the door. The Queer kids, more than anyone, learned exactly what it meant to work out our faith with fear and trembling. They told us to read the Bible and take it seriously and then mocked us for becoming 'social justice warriors.'"

The struggle of evangelical leaders to cope with the exvangelical movement is really interesting, and as I read about it I learn a lot of things I didn't know about the evangelical subculture. But I bring it up today not out of schadenfreude or the hope that all those exvangelicals will come flocking back here and tell us how right we were all along. I bring it up today because the last 40 years of wilderness may have been preparing us for a whole new paradigm for "God's people."

I'm also old enough to remember earnest conversations in college classes about interfaith dialog, and how important it was to listen to others from different traditions, before you tried to decide whose tradition was correct. That conversation is *long* over. Now faith communities are just sharing, not bothering to straighten out whose theology is most consistent or whose scriptures are most infallible. Muslims are just inviting everybody to iftar dinners during Ramadan. The Tu Vien Hong Duc Vietnamese temple on South 9<sup>th</sup> Street is inviting *everybody* today to celebrate the anniversary of the installation of their bodhisattva

Quan Am statue in 2014. Also there'll be a dharma talk. You can go, you can not go. You're invited. The chapel downstairs in this building has become an interfaith room.

Maybe God is taking us through an adaptive change in how faith is /curated/ and lived out. Maybe we all need to deconstruct our paradigm of religious community, so that the edges are blurrier and there's more mixing going on on those edges. It's enormously disruptive—I don't mean to minimize the impact on, for instance, the United Church of Christ, which has spent my adult life downsizing while still trying desperately to make meaningful changes for peace and justice. Or the United Methodist Church, torn asunder by disagreement over LGBTQ legitimacy. It's enormously disruptive. But I look at organizations like Eboo Patel's Interfaith Youth Core and the Charter for Compassion that Karen Armstrong started, and I think this might be the new model for people of faith: we come from our various faith traditions and we make friends in other faith traditions so that we can work together to heal the world.

It's easy to look at the Hebrew people in the wilderness, six weeks out from a jaw-dropping miracle, and make fun of them for worrying about whether God is still with them and where's their next meal coming from. But we have the benefit of hindsight. We know they made it. I think we should take from this story the possibility that God is with us too, but trying to get us through a paradigm change so that we can overcome the divisions of religion and do the work of faith.

Faithful God, you ask us to be faithful people, as the ground shifts beneath us.  
You ask us to be people of justice as the standards of what is just change.  
You ask us to be people of mercy, when we ourselves feel helpless..  
Be with us in the change as we try to be faithful in large ways and in small ways  
so your eternal community may come in every way. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://revgalblogpals.org/2021/10/04/narrative-lectionary-lets-eat-exodus-161-18/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2021/08/28/evangelicals-youre-still-not-really-listening-to-what-exvangelicals-are-saying/>