

Story and Meditation: Heaven's Bread

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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Psalm 78:23-29

by *Eric Anderson*

The 'elepaio are curious birds. They like to look in on what other birds are doing, and what other creatures are doing, and even what people are doing in the mountain forests. Mostly, though, a young 'elepaio is curious about one thing:

What's good to eat?

One young 'elepaio was particularly interested in this question. Her approach to this was to ask the question. Often. Very often. Startlingly often. Eventually, annoyingly often.

She'd see a twig and ask, "Is this good to eat?" Well, no, it wasn't.

She'd see a leaf and ask, "Is this good to eat?" No, it wasn't.

She'd see a flower and ask, "Is this good to eat?" If she'd been an 'apapane or an i'iwi, it might have been, but she was an 'elepaio, so no, it wasn't.

She'd see a bug and ask, "Is this good to eat?" and most of the time the answer was, "Yes."

Her parents tried to teach her two things that she was finding, if not hard to grasp, at least not immediately useful. They tried to teach her, first, that good things to eat fit basically into a small number of categories: bugs and caterpillars. If she would limit her questions to bugs and caterpillars, her parents thought, this would be a Very Good Thing. They were tired of being asked "Is this good to eat?" about tree bark and lichen.

The other thing that they kept trying to teach her was that if it was good to eat yesterday, it was good to eat today, and if it hadn't been good to eat today, it wasn't going to change and become good to eat tomorrow. This was the really sticky one. They probably could have handled the "Is this good to eat?" question about koa leaves if she didn't ask it every single day as if she'd never seen it before. How many times did she have to be told that ohia twigs weren't food?

They sought out an older 'elepaio, the wisest of the family, who thought about it for a moment.

"Next time she asks if something is good to eat, invite her to try it," he said.

"But then she'll eat leaves and twigs," they objected.

“She’ll stop,” said the elder ‘elepaio.

And that’s what happened. The first day was kind of a mess. Invited to give it a try, she ate ohī’a twigs, a koa leaf, a bamboo orchid flower, assorted pebbles, and several kinds of moss. She didn’t like any of those.

On the other hand she did enjoy several beetles, a couple of flies, and a particularly unlucky moth. The next day she tried a couple of flowers again, without enjoying them at all. She left the rocks completely alone, and only made a peck or two at a twig. On the third day she concentrated on the bugs and spiders, and only attempted to eat one twig that, it must be said, looked a lot like a caterpillar.

The relieved parents went to thank the ‘elepaio elder. “How did you know that would work?” they asked.

The elder bird’s eyes twinkled. “Well, it could be,” he said, “that once upon a time I had to learn the hard way, too.”

“Man hu,” the Israelites asked when they saw the pale, flaky substance on the ground. “What is it?” They hadn’t seen it before. They didn’t recognize it. They didn’t know what it was.

Truthfully, we don’t know what it was, either. There are ideas, mind you. There are substances produced by insects in the desert areas of the Middle East today that bear a pretty close resemblance to the description here in Exodus. Some of them are used for food, even as an ingredient in bread. The miracle may have been the identification of a food source that they’d already seen, but hadn’t recognized as food.

Or the miracle may have been the expanded quantity, because you won’t find enough of these flaky little wafers to feed a large group of people. The miracle might also have been the provision of a brand new thing – something that ceased to be provided when the Israelites entered their new homeland forty some years later.

For the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai, it was a brand new thing regardless. They had lived their lives in the river valley of the Nile. If the manna described by Exodus was, in fact, the crystallized honeydew of the Tamarisk manna scale insect – and yes, somebody named it that doubtless because the resemblance to the Exodus description – the Israelites weren’t likely to have seen it before.

“Man hu?” they said. “What is it?”

It was the answer to their prayer. Or, well, their grumbling. Stephen B. Reid writes at Working Preacher, “They complain about the present reality of a troublesome liberation with a fictitious enslavement... The fictitious memory of enslavement ‘if only’ posits death instead of life in

liberation... However, the community misremembers enslavement as a time when enslaved persons sat by fleshpots and ate their fill of bread... The appetite for food made the people 'hangry.'"

As Dr. Reid observes, it's unlikely they ate their fill while enslaved in Egypt.

Still, a people accustomed to civilization and settled agriculture would find a wilderness environment threatening at least, and actively hostile at worst. The need was real: without food, they would die. In Exodus, this was the sixth time that the Israelites complained. They complained about being enslaved. They complained about having their sons murdered. They complained about being forced to make bricks without straw. They complained about being pursued by an army. They complained about having a water source that wasn't drinkable.

Those were good reasons to complain.

God sounded distinctly testy when speaking with Moses about all this. "I have heard the complaining," said God, rather than speaking of the need. Once food was provided, "then you shall know that I am the LORD your God."

Except that... they didn't know what it was.

There is something of a theme among Christians to see God's handwork in gifts of suffering. In the fourteenth century an English anchoress – that's basically a nun who lives alone – named Julian of Norwich prayed that she might learn something of the sufferings of Christ. She did. She fell seriously ill, and during that time had a series of visions of Jesus, in which she was assured of God's constant love. She wrote:

"From that time that it was shewed I desired oftentimes to learn what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after, and more, I was answered in ghostly understanding, saying thus: Wouldst thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love was His meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee? Love. Wherefore shewed it He? For Love. Hold thee therein and thou shalt learn and know more in the same. But thou shalt never know nor learn therein other thing without end. Thus was I learned that Love was our Lord's meaning."

We have called people saints and martyrs for their fortitude amidst suffering. Here in Hawai'i we might name Father Damien or Queen Lili'uokalani. I think Exodus reminds us of a more common spiritual experience, though. I think Exodus displays the risk of God's grace being offered... and you and I do not recognize it. Not because it's painful, not because it's difficult, not because it's challenging, but because it doesn't look like what we expect.

The fine flaky substance didn't look like bread. How are we to know what God offers us?

I think this is a summons to try things, things that look unfamiliar, things that look new. It's tempting to use this to argue once more for people to get vaccinated for COVID-19, but

vaccinations are not actually new. What is new, to us, are things like live streamed worship and Zoom-hosted Bible study and Holy Communion shared at scores of tables that may not be on the same island, or in the same time zone, or even at the same time.

I can't help but wonder how many blessings of God I passed by along the way because I simply didn't recognize them. I was eager to adopt the mantle of martyrdom – I was such a self-pitying seminary student, let me tell you - but what about the things that would have fed me that I simply missed?

I wish I had a better solution for you than, "Find a handy Moses or Aaron or Miriam or wise 'elepaio to point these things out to you," but I don't. It was other people, people who were acquainted with God's intent, that told the Israelites what they had. It's other people who are acquainted with the ways people learn and grow that tell us what we have.

The bread of heaven just doesn't look like what we anticipate. The universe is infinite, and God's love is greater even than that. Why should God's blessings be limited to the range of our imaginations? They can't be. They aren't. They won't.

So test those things before you to see what might be God's nourishment for you. Ask those about you for what they know and what they believe. And if you and I must learn what's good to eat of the grace of God the hard way... Well, so be it.

Amen.