

# An Answer to Prayer

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 145:1-8

## A Wilderness Story

Are you familiar with the saying, “Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it?” There is a similar saying at church, “Be careful what you pray for, careful what you ask for. Here at Crossroads, we might need to have another saying: “Be careful the questions you ask. In many ways, what you ask, you own. When the questions you ask are honest and they’re yours, and you ask them out loud, then you make a tacit commitment to seek the answer. As with today’s “Ask Jack” question, a question in multiple parts.

What do I really want in a relationship with God?

If I’m looking for a feeling of peace and well-being, what do I do relationally when that doesn’t seem to happen?

Do I need to try harder or trust more by letting go trying to control how I’m feeling?

The person who asked this question out loud to me realizes that she is already committed to finding the answer. As we talked about it, we have reduced her question to perhaps a simpler form. The question is about the balance between “striving” for meaning and “Sabbath” rest on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how to measure our progress on the journey when things seem so cyclical.

And I recognized right away that this is my question, too. How do I find that balance in my life? And how do I measure any progress I’m making? I chose the scripture lesson from Exodus 16 for the reason that this was the Hebrews’ story on their journey from Egypt, through the wilderness, following God. It is symbolic of our own life journeys, the story of manna in the wilderness. The Israelites left Egypt, under Moses’ leadership. After many fits and stops and plagues, they followed God through the wilderness. Before long, their supplies ran out and the Israelites began to do what they did so well—complain. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”

“Moses! We’re hungry. I wish we had never listened to you. I wish we had never left Egypt. We never should have done it. We could have grown old in Egypt with plenty to eat. Now we’re starving to death, in the wilderness with you, Moses!”

If you read the Exodus stories, you’ll remember this was not the first or the last time the Israelites complained and whined to Moses. Sometimes it got so bad that even God lost his temper and asked Moses if he could just wipe them all out! But this time, God was a little more creative.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.’”

This is a Sabbath story, a faith story. The rhythm of Sabbath was always to gather or prepare twice as much on the sixth day or the sixth year so that there would be enough for the Sabbath day, or for the Sabbatical year. Sabbath was as much about trust as it was about rest.

Manna was bread from heaven that lay on the ground like the dew each morning and the people went out and collected what they needed. Also each evening, quail landed on the ground and people collected them for meat. Moses told the people, this food is from God.

What do you really want in a relationship with God? Regardless of how you conceive of God, what keeps standing in your way of feelings of peace and well-being? Where’s the doorway through to the quality of life you really desire? Do you need to be trying harder, but trying harder at what? Striving for what? What are you striving for so hard? Or do you need to be letting go? Letting go of what? For what are you resting? Why are you meditating? For what are you praying?

If you want, really want, the quality of life Jesus taught about and offered, the quality of life reflecting the “Kingdom of God” or “Life of God,” then you have to work for it. Discovering who you are and what you feel called to with life requires work. It requires investing your time and energy. It involves investing your money in doing what feels compelling to you. Being involved and engaged helps clarify your identity and your direction, how you most want to give yourself in the world at the same time, finding identity and direction, also requires that you let go of action and engagement, that you actually disengage, let go and be still, to be in God’s presence; to find that quiet place deep within your own life where God meets you personally and intimately.

What’s the balance? Most people want an abundant life that includes: engaging in activity that is both meaningful and life-giving, finding a personal center within ourselves where we encounter the holy, and having a general sense of feeling and peace. The journey of life is a process that seems to move through these areas, but my experience is that it’s often a bumpy ride! I find myself working hard to discern what it is I really want to do in terms of activity, ministry, and even work. No job or ministry is really a perfect match. Some have bits and pieces of what I consider life giving opportunities, but these are accompanied with lots of demands that are, frankly, deadly.

On the other side of the road, my efforts to become more centered are often hijacked by forces around me. Instead of feeling peaceful and centered, I feel anxious and driven from outside myself. Does this sound at all familiar to you? Well, I think this is just the way life is. Do you know what a “mobius strip” is? It is a great image for a life journey that moves back and forth between outward striving and inward releasing, but the journey not always gentle. Balance is not really finding balance, but continuing to try can be difficult to know if you are even growing spiritually or not. The best thing is to keep moving forward and doing the best you can to seek meaningful activity and nurture inner peace at the core of yourself.

The rhythm in my life is very much like the Hebrews in wilderness. “If only we had died by...in Egypt!” In other words, I wish I had stayed home, kept to what was familiar and comfortable. I could have lived to a ripe old age in familiar surroundings and relative comfort. I could have visualized my life to its end instead of taking off on this new adventure where things are not nearly so clear or predictable! Have you ever felt that way?

I suspect more than one of you sitting here has thought, “I wish I had just left well enough alone, stayed where I was, didn’t take that new job or move to that new location or invest in that new relationship. If I had just stayed put and not tried the new thing, I would be able to live out the rest of my life in relative comfort and certainly in familiar surroundings? Anyone ever think that?

More than once in my life, I’ve thought that the last ten years, here in Kansas City, here at Crossroads as your pastor, have been life changing for me. I say that in all sincerity and gratitude, being here, working with you all, I have grown as a human being, as a follower of Jesus, and as a pastor.

I would not be honest, however, if I didn’t say that there have been times, more than once perhaps, that I’ve thought, “I wish I could have stayed and grown old in the familiar surroundings of the church where I was, of the lifestyle and community where I had lived most of my life. I have envied, at least a little, those folks who have stayed put, whose mortgages have gotten paid down, whose retirement fund is waiting to be used, and whose families surround them.

And yet I know, if I had remained in Egypt (Virginia, in my case) once I knew that my calling lay further west, through a wilderness in Kansas City, I am sure that to have stayed would have meant death--perhaps not physical death, though many physical diseases are emotionally and spiritually based—but death for certain, as new life for me would have failed to flourish.

A life that flourishes is not measured in dollars or comfortable familiarity or even the reassurance that I will live out my life in relative peace. Sometimes it works out that way, but there are no promises. But a life that flourishes—or as Jesus called it, “an abundant life”—is measured by other things: by corners turned, fears faced, challenges met, dreams pursued, and turning points crossed.

There is a second facet of this journey of faith. In addition to the rhythm of the inward and outward journey in terms of striving and Sabbath, action and contemplation, there is another movement from outside to inside. This is to move from seeking meaning, direction, identity, and even authority outside ourselves to discovering it within ourselves. It is the journey from God out there to God within each of us; God as a partner with us in the shaping and even the creating of our own lives.

God intersects each of us at the core of ourselves. In that intersection, that center, there is identity, direction, and authority for life. I believe God has created us to be more independent than dependent as persons. There certainly is no shortage of voices around us, trying to tell us who we are and what we should do. A challenge is to become more independent of those voices, to find the Holy within us. Fr. Richard Rohr has written:

We won't be prepared to die until we have truly lived. For some paradoxical reason, people who have experienced life intensely and fully are the ones who are most able to let go of it. They seem to die with the same passion with which they lived. Those who most fear death are those who have not yet begun to live. Those who have lived a full life have learned already how to include death; death is not a stranger.

People with unlived lives unconsciously know that true insight and vitality have somehow eluded them, leaving them without a center or even a sense of why they were ever born. Their real self—*soul*—has not been *awakened* and so they lack a deep sense of themselves, or any eternal purpose. Having not yet begun to live, they can't imagine dying. It is still foreign territory, a destination preceded by no journey toward it. Anxiety haunts their nights and days, searching in outer places for what they can only find *within*.

*(On the Threshold of Transformation, 317)*

God's Spirit encourages us to trust who we are, to choose what we will do in our lives, and to accept the consequences of our choices. As we live this way, taking the risks and facing the challenges that are inevitable in this way of living, we actually find the peace we've been seeking.

## **Exodus 16: 2-15**

<sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

<sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

<sup>4</sup>Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

<sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

<sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt,

<sup>7</sup>and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?"

<sup>8</sup>And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but" against the Lord.

<sup>9</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'"

<sup>10</sup>And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

<sup>11</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses and said,

<sup>12</sup>"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

<sup>13</sup>In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

<sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

<sup>15</sup>When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.