

Morning by Morning

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 20, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Athens

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 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 pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

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. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." 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, 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?" 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."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites: 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" 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. The Lord spoke to Moses, "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.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 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. 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."

(Exodus 16:2–15, NRSVue)

Most of the time, it seems, we live at least partly in the future. We put things on calendars weeks or months away. We make reservations, schedule appointments, buy tickets, imagine Christmas, next summer, retirement. Even when life is busy, there's usually some sense of a road stretching ahead of us, and we move along it assuming that, one way or another, we'll figure out what comes next.

But there are seasons when the future suddenly seems to contract. Something happens that we didn't plan for and could not have imagined, and the wide road ahead narrows to a few uncertain steps. The questions become smaller and more urgent: *What do we do now? What*

happens tomorrow? How are we going to get through this week? Sometimes the horizon draws so close that simply making it through the day feels like a big enough ask.

And in those moments, what we might want most is a *map*. We might want someone to tell us where this road is going, how long it will last, what awaits beyond the next stretch. We'd like to know that if we can endure this much longer, then we'll arrive somewhere safer. But life doesn't always give us that. There are roads we travel without knowing their length, wildernesses whose far edge remains hidden.

The Israelites in our scripture text this morning know something about this. By the time we meet them in the 16th chapter of Exodus, Egypt is behind them. They have seen things no generation before them had seen: plagues breaking Pharaoh's power, a night of hurried departure, the sea opening before them and closing behind them. The people who had spent generations making bricks for somebody else's empire are *free*.

And freedom, it turns out, is *terrifying*. They're standing in the wilderness with no crops around them, no granaries, no obvious means of sustaining a multitude. Egypt is behind them, but whatever God has promised lies somewhere beyond the horizon. And right now, the children are hungry. The adults are hungry. And suddenly the old life begins to look not so bad.

"If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt," they complain, "when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread." That is an astonishing recollection of Egypt! These are the people whose labor Pharaoh had made unbearable, whose infant sons had once been marked for death, whose lives had been measured in bricks and quotas. Yet hunger can do strange things to memory. When the future frightens us enough, even a painful past can acquire a kind of glow. At least we knew how things worked there. At least we knew where the bread came from.

We'd be misguided to judge them too quickly. The wilderness is real. Their hunger is real. Freedom has carried them into a place where they can no longer depend upon the terrible predictability of Pharaoh's world, and now they must discover whether this God who brought them out can also be trusted with *ordinary things*: supper tonight, breakfast tomorrow, the needs of children waking hungry in the morning.

And God hears them. There is no grand proclamation first. God doesn't wait for the people to become more grateful, more courageous, more spiritually mature. God tells Moses that bread *will* come. That evening, quail cover the camp. And then, sometime during the night, dew settles over the wilderness. Morning comes.

As the sun begins to rise and the dew lifts from the ground, something is there that had not been there before, fine and flaky across the surface of the ground. The people step out of their tents and stare at it. "What is it?" They don't yet recognize the answer to their hunger when they see it.

“It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat,” Moses tells them. And perhaps even more important than that – than *what* God gives them – is the *way* God gives it: *There is enough for the day*. The wilderness doesn’t disappear. No map to the promised land falls from heaven beside the bread. The people are not told how many miles remain or what dangers wait farther down the road. They are given what they need to live *this day*. Tomorrow will have to be received tomorrow.

Understand, that is a very strange way to live, especially for people who have spent their lives under Pharaoh. Egypt had trained them to live by quotas, by measurable production, by the relentless demand for more. But now, in the wilderness, God begins teaching them another rhythm. *Receive. Gather. Eat. Rest. Wake again*. The habits of *freedom* have to be *learned*.

And this, surely, is one of the strange new worlds Scripture opens for us. We spend much of our lives trying to secure ourselves against uncertainty. We save, plan, insure, organize, anticipate. No doubt, much of that is simply wisdom. But beneath it can lie the quiet hope that perhaps, if we arrange enough things correctly, we might finally get far enough ahead of life that we can make ourselves safe from whatever comes.

The wilderness strips away that illusion. There are things no careful planning can prevent. There are diagnoses no calendar anticipated, losses no savings account can undo, phone calls after which the world looks different from the way it did five minutes before. There are people we love who find themselves on roads we cannot walk for them, however much we wish we could. And there are times when all our intelligence and foresight cannot tell us what next month will look like.

Then what does *trust* mean? Sometimes we speak of trust as though it were a feeling of confidence, a settled assurance that everything is going to work out exactly as we hope. And if we’re scared enough, then real *faith*, real *trust*, can feel like one *more* thing we’re failing at. We’re anxious, so we imagine that we’re not trusting God enough. We wake at three in the morning rehearsing possibilities spiraling out of control, and then feel guilty because surely faithful people should be calmer than this.

But maybe the trust to which God calls us looks more ordinary than non-stop faith heroics. Maybe sometimes it’s just getting up in the morning when you don’t know what the afternoon will bring. Maybe it’s making the call that needs to be made, receiving the help that’s offered, allowing someone to walk beside you. Maybe it’s doing the next faithful thing when you cannot yet see where all those small acts of faithfulness are leading.

Jesus, of course, will one day teach his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” He doesn’t teach them to ask for enough bread to insure tomorrow and the days beyond. He teaches them to do that *next faithful thing*, to learn to receive life as those who remain dependent, morning by morning, upon grace. From one point of view, this “daily bread” can seem quite modest. But there are other days when we can clearly see the *truth* – that receiving life in this way is an *enormous* gift: Enough strength to get out of bed. Enough clarity to make

the next decision. Enough patience and love to faithfully accompany someone whose suffering you can't fix. Enough courage to live with a question that has no answer yet.

And sooner or later, nearly all of us come to that place of need. There are people in this room who know what it is to wait for test results, to watch someone they love struggle, to learn the geography of a hospital corridor. Some know what it is to wake into grief and remember all over again what – or *who* – has been lost. Some are trying to hold a family together, or trying to understand a child they can't protect from every hurt, or wondering whether work will still be there a few months from now. Some carry struggles nobody else in this room knows anything about.

And often the hardest part is not simply the pain. It's the *not knowing*. *How long? Where is this going? Will the people we love be OK? Will we be able to bear what comes next? When will this wilderness end?* These are questions faith doesn't permit us to answer cheaply. We can't promise that every illness will be cured, every relationship repaired, every danger avoided. Scripture itself is far too honest for that.

But *God* is there. And there is *bread* there. The wilderness remains wilderness, but *because* God is there, it becomes a place through which life can still move. That distinction is important, because sometimes the grace of God doesn't appear as *escape* from what frightens us. Sometimes it comes as enough strength to live faithfully within a day we would never have chosen.

And then *night* falls. This is the part of the story I find both the hardest and most beautiful. The people eat what has been given. The day ends. They lie down in their tents with the wilderness stretching around them under the darkness, and tomorrow's bread is *not* yet in their hands. They have to sleep anyway. They can't gather Tuesday's manna on Monday morning and stack it safely beside the bed, to make daily trust unnecessary. They lie down having been fed for that day.

And then somewhere in the darkness, before they can see it, dew begins settling over the ground. Morning comes again. The first light spreads across the wilderness. People stir beneath their tents. Someone steps outside and looks down. And there it is: *Bread for another day*. There may be no great feeling of triumph in that. Sometimes there is simply the quiet recognition that we *have* been given this day, and the provision to live it has somehow arrived with it. Morning by morning.

And over time, something happens in the wilderness that Israel could never have seen from those first frightened days beyond Egypt. The wilderness doesn't become easy, and they don't walk through it without failure or sorrow. But the God who met them beside the sea keeps meeting them *farther* down the road: in bread, in water, in cloud and fire, in forgiveness after costly mistakes, in a presence that refuses to abandon them.

And perhaps one day we will look back upon a wilderness of our own and realize that this is how grace carried us too. Not by showing us everything at the beginning. Not by placing the whole future safely within our grasp. But by meeting us in mornings we were not sure we could face, giving strength we did not yet have, placing people beside us whose presence became its own kind of manna.

The roads we travel may always be longer than we want them to be, and there are surely twists and turns ahead. But one of the quiet mercies of this daily bread is that we are not asked to live tomorrow before tomorrow comes. We can receive what has been given for today, do the next faithful thing, and when the evening comes, let the day go. The questions we cannot answer tonight can remain unanswered for a while longer.

And know that while we sleep, the wilderness is not empty. Dew gathers silently over the ground, hidden in the dark, until morning reveals gifts not of our own making. We wake, and there *is* bread again. Not the whole journey. Not every answer. But enough, enough to rise and walk on, morning by morning – to the glory of God. Amen.