

## *"It Is What It Is"*

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

John 6:24-35

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Today is August 1st and I am having a hard time getting my mind around school starting in Fairfax County three weeks from tomorrow. So I have been surprised by commercials for back to school supplies and social media articles on helping your child's transition back - the latest repost I saw with a list of "better questions to ask your child at the end of the school day"

<https://herviewfromhome.com/50-questions-to-ask-your-kids-instead-of-asking-how-was-your-day/>

In order to avoid a perfunctory answer of "fine" to the usual question of "how was school today" this article suggested questions like: What was something that made you laugh today? What word did your teacher say the most today? Where is a place in your school that you really like to be? When were you able to help someone?

You can't answer 'fine' to any of those questions. Not even "yes" or "no". These questions open doors to deeper sharing of thoughts and feelings. They are also suggestive, if you know you are going to be asked how you help you might be more likely to look for moments to do so, and they signal your commitment to listen – you are present in the moment and have the time for a longer answer.

In today's scripture readings there are questions, one in the Exodus scripture asked by the Israelites directed to Moses, and also God, and several in the gospel of John by the crowd directed to Jesus. The question the Israelites ask in Verse 15 of Exodus 16, has only three words in it - what is it? The Israelites have received a gift from the very hand of God, and they ask Moses, "what is it?" I imagine this moment for Moses to be something like how a parent responds in panic when a young child opens a gift from a grandparent and responds with those same words "what is it?" *Shhh, don't say that; that's rude. Just say thank you.* Maybe the only thing worse than saying "what is it" to a well-meaning Grandparent is saying it to God.

Those of you who have studied this passage know that it is actually some good biblical humor, because the Hebrew for “What is it?” is Manna. The Israelites entire provision from God during the 40 years of their wilderness journey will be a **question**. You would think that at some point the Israelites would have changed its name to Toe-dah, the Hebrew word for Thank-you, so that every day they ate “thank you” in the wilderness instead of “what is it?”

There are instructions that go with the Manna in this section of Exodus: it was to be daily bread, one portion to be collected each morning except for the day before the Sabbath when you collected two. Any attempts to go against God’s plan - to store, or hoard, Manna overnight meant that you woke up to worms, maggots and mold on your Manna. That is the kind of lesson you only need to learn once.

These instructions make clear that questions “what is it” and statements like “thank you” are going to be connected in the rhythm of every day.

Will it be there this morning? Yes, thank you God.

Will there be enough for me and mine? Yes, thank you God.

What is it again? Regardless, thank you God.

There is a story in the midrash, books of Torah interpretation, that says Manna tasted differently, depending on the spiritual state of the person who ate it. If you complained about eating manna, or if your anxiety exceeded your thankfulness, it tasted bitter or bland, and was difficult even to swallow. If you ate with a heart of gratitude, it tasted delicious and sweet.

The Israelites complained to God in the wilderness and God heard and provided for them, but they still needed help figuring out that what they received was a gift, no less a gift from God who heard their cry. And then they spent each day of the years of searching for manna in the morning somewhere on a continuum of anxiety and thankfulness, and somewhere on a continuum of complaint and praise. Which are the same continuums on which I, and many of the people I know, spend our days.

There are times when, like Manna for the Israelites, our daily bread doesn’t look much like bread. Or at least not like the bread we are used to. Depending on the day we might wake up with anxiety and end with thankfulness, or begin strong with praise and go to bed with complaint, or any combination of these. I have enough faith to know that God is not afraid of my *and our* questions that come from any place we find ourselves on the continuum.

Because like teachers often say, there are no bad questions. For even the ones that might seem bad, because they are straight up anxiety worries like the Israelites— is this what I asked for God and is there enough, how we ask that ourselves, and as a church - or straight up complaints like the Israelites began in Exodus 16 – Why are we so far away from the better days we can remember for us as a people, there are deep questions of the spirit that led us to ask them, and God knows that.

Jesus knows it too, and that is why in the Gospel Passage Jesus doesn't answer what the crowd actually asks, but he answers what they are *really asking*, what their hearts and souls really want to know and hear. Which is a hallmark of Jesus in John's gospel. The very first question asked of Jesus back in Chapter One of this Gospel is "Rabbi, where are you staying?"

Jesus doesn't answer with the details of his accommodations - "Oh, I am staying just up the road" because Jesus hears the question as really asking, Jesus can I come too, is there room for me? How does Jesus answer? He invites the person, Andrew and one other, to come and follow him, because Jesus has room for more, and for you and me to follow him, and be with him, and to stay by him, and he by us.

Now in Chapter 6, today's reading, the first question the crowd asks is similarly factual, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" A bit of background on earlier in this chapter about how we get to that question: Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and draws a large crowd as he teaches, and then feeds the crowd of 5,000 – actually it is Andrew the same person who asked Jesus "Rabbi, where are you staying" who helps Jesus do it.

Later on that night the crowd knows that the disciples get in a boat to go to Capernaum and that Jesus doesn't go with them. The next morning the crowd wakes up and realize they have been moved by Jesus and want to see him again, so they search for him, and count boats wondering if Jesus has left, since the same number of boats are still by the sea, still can't find him, so they get in boats and cross the sea, and are surprised to find Jesus across the sea.

They don't know, what we who have read this Chapter and the disciples who were there know. How did Jesus get across that sea – yeah - he walked. So when the crowd asks "when did you come here?" Jesus knows that they are not looking for him to say, "oh, this morning." They are wondering just how miraculous Jesus is, and if they can always find him when they need him. And they wonder if Jesus

has room for more – for more time with them and more blessings for them – blessings of bread for their stomachs and words of life for their souls.

Those are the questions that Jesus answers with these words: There is a food that endures for eternal life, and a bread from God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, and that the blessings of bread and words of life they found on the hillside are actually one and the same in Jesus, who is the bread of life.

There is always more of this bread of life, so you need not hunger for it. It comes from the gracious hand of God, to answer the question we might not have even known we were asking. We have hungers, empty places to be filled, and hungers of the belly or the spirit or the mind or the heart are exhausting, and we have done a lot of searching to fill ourselves up, we know something about the Israelites anxiety of wondering each morning, if we will have enough for what we need that day, if we will find more - right when things seem to be running out.

We also know something about the crowds searching for Jesus after a mere taste of what he promises, that even as we have our situations – the details and trials of each day, or a week, or a period of our lives, or maybe an extended time in the wilderness, Jesus is always showing us that there is more. And that more always comes as salvation, when Jesus shows up in the middle of a situation or moment, most often a hard life moment, and tilts our chin up from our narrow and anxious focus, and helps us see him, the bread of life himself, holding what we were searching for in outstretched hands, and all we can muster to say, as we are finally able to see him is, “Rabbi, when did you come?”

He will come today to you at this table.

What is it? It is what Jesus the bread of life gives to you today as the gift of daily bread. The world doesn't give it to you, Jesus does, so nothing in this whole wide world can take it away. It is enough for today, to eat this ordinary bread that conveys a life that death can't hold and a love that never ends.