

IT'S REIGNING BREAD

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems
March 6, 2016



Exodus 16:2-7

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 fleshpots 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?"

DO YOU SOMETIMES FEEL LIMITED IN THE IMPACT YOU CAN HAVE on this world that seems increasingly unstable?

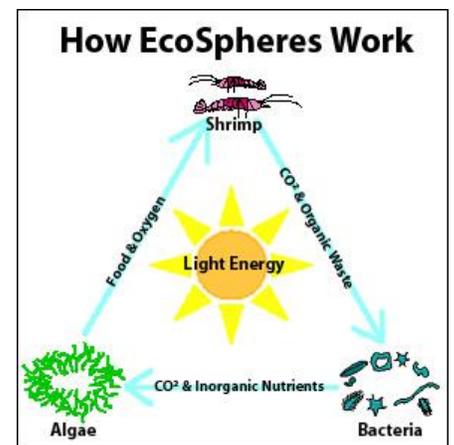
I would like to introduce you to our family's newest and smallest pets—The Shrimp Boys. They live in this tiny little world called an EcoSphere, a Christmas gift from my friend Jim. The EcoSphere was developed by Nasa's Jet Propulsion Lab as scientists researched ways to prepare humans for long journeys in space. The closed ecosystem contains marine shrimp, algae, other microorganisms, a non-living sea fan branch, and some gravel and shells. The sphere handbook describes it as a "biological battery." It requires gentle indirect light, which makes algae grow, which in turn produce oxygen and food for the shrimp. The shrimp produce carbon dioxide and solid waste, which the bacteria and algae use to keep the cycle of life going.

In paying closer attention to them over the past few days, I can see why the late astrophysicist Carl Sagan wrote the following in his review of the EcoSphere regarding care for the tiny community: "You're limited, painfully limited. You even wonder if it's cruel to put them in this crystal prison. But you reassure yourself that at least they are safe from whales and oil slicks and cocktail sauce."¹

Do you sometimes feel limited, even painfully limited, in the impact you can have on this world that seems increasingly unstable?

You are not alone.

Our predecessors in faith featured in today's Scripture reading from Exodus had been through greater trials and tribulations than most of us can possibly comprehend. They were slaves who had been subject to the harsh ways of Egyptian



¹ "Carl Sagan Review of the Ecosphere," 1986, <http://eco-sphere.com/sagan.html>

rule. Based on the biblical record, today's passage is set approximately one month after Moses and Aaron led the Hebrew people from Egypt. After passing through the sea and escaping their bondage under Pharaoh, they are now wandering in the desert. They don't yet know that they'll be doing that for 40 years, but are ready to give up after one month. They look back on the previous situation—awful as it was—and decide that is was better. “At least we had enough food to eat, they say.” And they really blast Moses, telling him they would have been better off dying in Egypt. To top it all off, they accuse Moses and Aaron of bringing them into the desert to kill them. They are whining up a storm. And how does God respond? Let us continue together with Exodus 16:13-15:

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.

“What is it?” is the literal translation of the Hebrew *manhu*, or manna.

Though God seems annoyed by the whining, the response is a large measure of grace in causing it to “rain” bread for the people. Sure enough, they wake up in the morning to a ground covered with particles about the size of coriander seed and spread over the ground like frost or resin. The people baked or boiled it and made cakes tasting like honey or something cooked with olive oil.

God's provision typically does not arrive exactly as expected. There are different theories about exactly what this manna actually was. Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament Professor Emeritus from Luther Seminary, believes that manna was derived from the Tamarisk, or Salt Cedar tree.² Not the tree itself, but an excretion from plant lice feeding on the tree, that becomes a yellowish white flake or ball. Natives in the area today still gather it and bake it into a kind of bread they call manna. The reality is that no one knows whether there were enough tamarisk trees and lice to produce enough of this nutritious excrement to feed several hundred thousand people, but something miraculous was happening.

I mention this because when we read about miracles in the Bible, it is natural for us to wonder where the miracles are today. The Hebrew people following Moses and Aaron might have been walking right by this miraculous bread from heaven and not noticed it. Maybe we do as well. All too often in life, things happen that we might classify as excrement. When they happen, how do we respond and how can we know whether Jesus is walking with us?

I know a person who has been through his own time of wandering through the desert of life. Tim was a corporate CFO who worked very long hours. Most of his life was work. But then one day everything changed. He received the news that he had cancer and the prognosis was not good. Tim decided that if he made it through, he had to do something different. He could not focus his life on something he didn't really care about. Tim did survive and found his bread from heaven from this awful situation—he actually opened a bakery with his wife. Their bakery was financially successful, and he learned a great deal. In addition to profit, he learned that he experienced joy in giving bread to the community. Tim also learned that bakery owners have to wake up at 3:00 am and can have their life just as consumed by work as anyone else. He ended up selling the bakery and served for several years as the executive director of an agency that helps break cycles of poverty for homeless people.

What about you? What spiritual deserts have you been through or are you in now? Are you stuck in some kind of rut and feel called to take a risk? Perhaps you are in a job that you were excited about at one point, but now find yourself miserable. Maybe you looked forward to parenthood or retirement or something in life but now find yourself struggling to feel fulfilled. Maybe you spend a lot of time thinking about money, wondering how much really is enough. Where is your bread in the desert? Are there ways God is providing for you that you aren't noticing?

Failing to recognize manna is easy for all of us to do. It is inevitable that we will all have times when we fail to appreciate God's provision. The Bible provides some guidance to help. With all of the whining about manna the Israelites ate during 40 years of wandering in the desert, God instructs Moses to save a jar of the flakes and place it front and center as they worshipped so no one could forget that God provided for them.

Truly acknowledging God's provision for us leads to Jesus, who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35) Jesus reassures us that God always provides. When he instructed us that the same God who feeds the birds will provide for us, he knows that we cannot just turn off the worry switch and stop whining alone.

Sometimes we are called to remind each other that God reigns and the bread continues to rain, even when it's hard to see.

² Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press).