

March 22, 2023 – Exodus 16:2-5, 11-18 & John 6:32-37

My mother has often told a story about what it was like when she and my father first moved to Akron, OH in the early 1970's. Because, as she tells it, downtown Akron was a smelly place. If you were in one part of downtown Akron, you would smell the tire factories. The odor of burnt rubber filling the air. If you were in another part of downtown Akron, you would smell the Quaker Oats factory. Which, according to her, perpetually smelled like burned popcorn.

But, if you were in a third part of Akron, you got a much better smell. You got the delightful aroma of the Wonderbread bakery. And of freshly baked bread. Quite the contrast, compared to the other two.

I didn't have to deal with this situation when I was growing up. By the mid-80's, Goodyear, Firestone, and Quaker Oats had all closed up shop and abandoned Akron. Which was horrible for the city. But it meant that I had only one smell to look forward to when I went to church or school: Baking bread. Which, to this day, is still one of my favorite smells on the entire planet. I will occasionally bake a loaf of bread on a lazy Saturday afternoon. And I think I do so as much for the smell as for the taste.

But I'm not alone in that opinion. Humanity has a long history with bread. Even secular historians will tell you that much of history and human civilization has revolved around the growing, processing, and baking of bread. All sorts of agricultural technology was invented to grow and mill grain. Virtually every ancient city in the world was founded based on its proximity to fertile land and water sources for growing wheat and barley.

And the Bible agrees with this assessment. Just look at Genesis 3. When God curses Adam after the Fall, he says, *“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”* Bread is a symbol of daily life after the Fall.

Up until that point, the Garden of Eden provided them their food. Fruits, vegetables, nuts, berries. Everything they needed, the earth gave to them without even asking. God had created this world as a home for Adam and Eve, and all of creation was a refrigerator stocked with food.

And then they fell into sin and that meal train ground to a halt. Creation would no longer automatically provide everything they needed. They would have to work for their food. They would have to clear fields and till soil and plant seeds and water crops and harvest grain and thresh wheat and grind flour and bake bread.

Work, work, work. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread. Life, food, basic survival, requires a tremendous amount of work. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. For your entire life. Working just to scrounge up our daily bread. Just to gather what we need to survive.

Except that there was a time in Israel's history when they didn't have to work. When they didn't eat bread by the sweat of their face. For forty years, God provided them daily bread.

And it's kind of ironic how it came about. They go into the wilderness and they begin to complain. What they are complaining about is hunger. Now, they're not actually hungry yet. They're complaining because they might become hungry in the future.

And so they weep and wail to Moses. *“Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full.”* Do you understand what they're suggesting? They're saying they wish the plagues that God inflicted upon Egypt had killed them too. All because they might run out of food at some point in the future. It's absolutely ridiculous.

But, out of his great and steadfast love, God listens to their prayers. They will need food at some point. And God has every intention of providing for them. And so he sends bread from heaven. Manna, that covers the ground every morning like a thin frost. More than enough for every man, woman, and child to eat and be satisfied.

And in so doing, God does something rather remarkable: he reverses that curse of the fall. *“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”* Except, it wasn't by the sweat of their face that they ate bread. They didn't have to do anything at all.

They walked out of their tent every morning and it was like the Garden of Eden all over again. All they had to do was reach down and scoop up a handful of food. Food that came not from the cursed ground of earth, but from heaven itself.

And that applied to every aspect of their lives. Food. Water. Even their clothes. God tells them in Deuteronomy 29, *“I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet.”* They may have been in the wilderness, but God provided them with Eden.

And yet, how do they respond to this gift of God? They enjoy the providence of God for forty years and then... complain about it. In Numbers 21, near the end of their wandering, it says, *“And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”*

God restores Eden itself to the Israelites and it's still not enough. They still complain about it. They still do not show an ounce of gratitude. They still do not trust that God will always provide for them.

If that's not sin at work, I don't know what is. But it's a feeling that we know quite well. Because God provides so much for us. And we complain plenty as well. We fail to show gratitude as well. We do not trust that God will always provide for us as well.

Of course, the situation is a bit different. Because we do work for our food. It is once again by the sweat of our face that we eat bread. And yet, God does provide an Eden for us. One that we don't appreciate as we should.

*“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* Jesus isn't talking about physical hunger. Just as when he offered living water and declared himself to be the light of the world, he's talking about spiritual things. Spiritual hunger. But it's no less real. No less important. No less deadly if it's not satisfied.

Jesus declares himself to be the bread of life. The bread from heaven. The manna that turns the wilderness into Eden. Though we live in a cursed land without food, without life, whoever comes to Jesus will never hunger again. And we have the promise of Jesus himself that whoever comes to him he will never cast out.

It sounds great. It sounds perfect. Sign me up! And yet, how many people are here this evening? Twenty? Thirty? I don't know, I haven't counted. It's not many though. Look at this congregation. Look at this community. Look at this country. How many people call themselves Christians? And how many of those actually take every opportunity they can to feed on the bread of life? Not many. Not nearly enough.

If someone found the Garden of Eden and told the world that they could live there, there would be a mad scramble to go. People climbing over each other to live in a perfect paradise. But like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have a spiritual Garden of Eden available to us every time we open God's Word, every time we gather to worship. But only a handful of people show up.

The rest complain. They complain that the worship service is too early. Or too late. That the music is too old. Or too contemporary. That the sermon is too long. Or too short. There's always something. Something that makes us grumble about the incredible gift that God has given to us.

It makes you wonder why God bothers with his Church at all. And yet, this is the same God who with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm rescued his people from Egypt. This is the same God who provided water from a rock and bread from heaven. This is the same God who led them into the Promised Land, even after they complained about all he did for them.

In fact, this is the same God who became man and died for us. That we might receive his body and blood. So that we might literally eat this bread of life, given for the life of the world.

You see, bread isn't just a symbol of how much we work for our food in a cursed, sinful earth. It's also a symbol of God's faithfulness and grace to a cursed, sinful people. It's a symbol that God will always provide for us, even though we are complaining and ungrateful and doubting. It's a symbol that God has brought a spiritual Eden to the wilderness of this earth and a promise that he will bring a physical Eden to the wilderness of this earth on the last day.

Do you smell that? No, it's not the smell of the Lenten dinner we ate before this service. It's the smell of baking bread. The smell of God's goodness to people who don't deserve goodness. The smell of life. The smell of hope. The smell of a new Eden. Where we may eat from both the Tree of Life and the Bread of Heaven. Because they are both found in Jesus Christ and in Him crucified for us. Amen.