

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Daily Bread**

"Why didn't God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!" - *Exodus 16:1-15*

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. - *Philippians 1:20-30*

I don't know about you, but it seems there is a lot to worry about these days. The news is full of political instability, economic uncertainty and world problems. There are lots of personal stresses too: relationships and health concerns and difficulties with the people we care about: times are challenging for many of us.

There are lots of things that can cause us anxiety and worry. In that, the biblical writers are no different than many of us. In the reading we heard this morning, Paul is in prison, wondering whether he will live or die. Some from our congregation may be in hospital this morning, wondering the same thing. And the people of Israel have been in the wilderness a month, and they are in a bleak barren landscape where there is no prospect of food. These people aren't whining, carping, nitpicking or nagging. They have legitimate concerns about serious issues. It is not a bad thing to tell your leaders about your problems and concerns. It is a bad thing if you resort to blame and recrimination, if your problems end up dividing you.

The people of Israel said "It would have been better if God had killed us quickly in Egypt, when we had pots full of meat stew and bread enough to fill our bellies, than to slowly waste away here in the wilderness!"

And the story says that God does not criticize or condemn them for raising their concerns. Instead he answers them: "Bread will rain from heaven for you, enough for each day. Not enough to hoard or stockpile. Enough for each day." And that is what happened, according to the story. In the evening there were quails, and in the morning, each morning, there was a flaky substance like frost on the ground. When they saw it, the people asked, "What is it?" *man-hu* in Hebrew, and ever since it has been called manna, manna from heaven – perhaps you've heard of it before. The people gathered enough for each day. If they tried to gather more, it went bad. Except on Friday morning. Friday morning they could gather enough to last through the Sabbath.

We don't tell this story to relate ancient history, but to teach us a spiritual lesson. The story is intended to help us deal with anxiety about the future. Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, we have legitimate concerns and legitimate worries: Famines happen, bankruptcies happen, people lose their jobs and their livelihoods, and life gets harder, sometimes much harder. Life can change in an instant, with a car accident or a diagnosis, and we can find ourselves wishing that we had been struck down suddenly in the prime of life rather than languishing in despair and fear and pain.

The story addresses such experiences. It teaches us to focus on the daily bread and the daily blessings and not to dwell on the future. It doesn't mean we shouldn't plan for the future, but it helps us to live in the present.

Many people find it helpful, in challenging times, to keep a gratitude journal. A friend once told me how keeping a journal has trained her to notice things she is grateful for. Because she knows that she will have to come up with a few things each day, she has become more attentive to the good things in her life. She is more grateful, more appreciative because of this regular practice. Writing in a gratitude journal has trained her to recognize the daily bread of God's blessings in the specific and ordinary events of each day. Especially in anxious times, in difficult times, such practices can sustain us, give us hope, teach us joy.

Writing from prison, the apostle Paul pours out his gratitude and rejoicing to the Philippians. It is an astonishing letter. He has every reason to be anxious. He is a political prisoner, imprisoned for teaching about God's kingdom and encouraging people to transfer their loyalty from Caesar's kingdom to God's kingdom. In that society, like many today, such teaching was viewed as subversive, worthy of imprisonment, and sometimes death. He writes frankly about the possibility he may not survive.

He's not being pessimistic, but realistic. If he doesn't die soon, he will die later. That he will die is a certainty. None of us gets out of this life alive. We all have to face our own death at one point or another. We can hide from it, but then every hint of threat will bring us anxiety and fear, and death when it comes will be traumatic and devastating. Or we can accept it, and put our lives in God's hands. When we accept it, then we can cease living for ourselves and devote our lives to God's service, and when we do that, we can live, like Paul, without anxiety or fear, but with hope and faith and trust. When we are living for a great cause, then we can truly let go of fear and believe that, with Paul, we can face whatever comes, trusting that some good will come out of it.

A woman once found herself anxious and unhappy. She wondered why, as she had everything she could have wished for. She went to see a therapist, and explained that

her life seemed empty, without meaning. She had worked her whole life to achieve financial success and now she was wealthy. She had everything that money could buy, but it wasn't enough.

The therapist has seen cases like this before, and had learned that there was only one solution. He also knew someone who could explain it better than he could, so he called over an older lady who cleaned the office floors and said to his client, "I'm going to ask Mary here to tell you how she found happiness. All I want you to do is listen to her."

So Mary smiled, put down her broom, sat on a chair and told her story: "Well, my husband died of cancer and three months later my only son was killed by a car. I had nobody... I had nothing left. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I never smiled at anyone, I even thought of taking my own life.

"Then one evening a little kitten followed me home from work. Somehow I felt sorry for that kitten. It was cold outside, so I decided to let the kitten in. I got it some milk, and the kitten licked the plate clean. Then it purred and rubbed against my leg and for the first time in months, I smiled.

"Then I stopped to think, if helping a little kitten could make me smile, maybe doing something for people could make me happy. So the next day I baked some biscuits and took them to a neighbor who was sick in bed. Every day after that I tried to do something nice for someone. It made me so happy to see them happy. Today, I don't know of anybody who sleeps and eats better than I do. I've found happiness, by giving it to others."

And with that Mary stood up and went back to sweeping the floor. The rich lady sat silently for a few minutes, watching Mary make her way around the office, noticing a quiet contentment, her friendly interactions with the others in the office. She really looked happy, doing her minimum wage job. When she turned back to the therapist, her eyes were bright with tears. "I would like to be as happy as she is," she said. "You can be," said the therapist, "when you really believe that the beauty of life does not depend on how happy you are, but on how happy others can be because of you."