

# Peter Bankson: Manna Does Not Mean Bread Alone

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Peter Bankson

## INTRODUCTION

This is a reflection on manna – just enough sustenance each day to keep going until tomorrow. Manna is a story about the "daily bread" that Jesus taught us to pray for. It is about God's care for the people of the covenant. I think it is also about how the realm of God is like that landowner in the Gospel lesson who made sure everyone who worked in the vineyard got paid the same at the end of the day.

Trusting God for the essentials of life is easy for me to understand, but frankly, in terms of the essentials, I have enough. There isn't much faith involved in thinking about my survival. God has blessed me with meaningful work, and there is enough food in my refrigerator for several days, so my faith is not being tested, at the moment, by threat of starvation.

## SCRIPTURE

The Hebrew scripture for this week is one of the classic stories of the relationship between God and the Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness:

*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 that brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because God 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 God 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 and said, "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 upon 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

**GOD GIVES US JUST ENOUGH TO GET US**

## **THROUGH THE DAY.**

Over the past week or so I've been thinking about manna in some different ways. Dependence on manna was a learning experience for the Israelites, as test of their faith. God met what they thought was their most critical need with "just-in-time" delivery of something unexpected. And although it took a while for them to get the point, and many similar occasions of just-in-time intervention to reinforce the lesson, they grew to become the empowered people of God. In the Gospel, laborers in the vineyard got Manna – just enough for the day, and the same amount, no matter how long they worked.

- How much is "just enough for the day?"
- How much of our lives falls in the "manna" category?
- And what does it mean for us, as individuals and as a church, to labor in the vineyard?

## **SIX LESSONS FROM THE MANNA**

There are at least six lessons in this story for us to think about today.

1. Our attention will be focused by the need we feel most strongly, then we'll be ready for manna, and a lesson in deeper faith.
2. We need time and help to understand who God is really calling us to be as a church.
3. We shouldn't expect to get enough to finish the job before we start. Manna comes a day at a time.
4. It takes a whole congregation to build a vision.
5. By the grace of God, we each get a full measure from being part of community.
6. If the lantern is lit, it's time to be on the way.

Let me turn to the six lessons from manna.

## **1. The Israelites had come to understand that their need was focused on food:**

*"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."*

For the congregation of the Israelites, their hunger brought them together and raised their consciousness. At that point they were ready for God's lesson on faith.

Is there some need that is focusing our attention as a congregation, and raising our consciousness? I sense that there are many needs clamoring for our attention: a new home; good stewardship of our resources; caring for children, our own and those seen in need in this city and the wider world; a sense that the political process has abandoned those who can not help themselves. A sense of need focuses our attention, but do we sense a common need?

LESSON ONE: Our attention will be focused by the need we feel most strongly, then we'll be ready for manna, and a lesson in deeper faith.

## **2. The Israelites needed some time and some help to understand their real needs:**

*So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD that brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because God has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?"*

The Israelites thought their problem was with Moses and Aaron, who had led them into a place where the term "God-forsaken" may have had its origins. It was up to Moses and Aaron (and their wives, I am sure) to turn the felt needs of the people into an opportunity to learn what it really meant to trust in

God.

I think it's the same with other problems, like vision. Last week I had a conversation with Bill Milliken the founder and president of CIS. He had just returned from an international conference called "Crossing Boundaries: Discovering and Creating Collaboration for Building Healthy Communities and Vital Societies." He said that one of the main conclusions of the conference was that communities do not begin to grow in a healthy way until they get beyond "problem-solving" and begin to live out of a vision for the future. As we know from the Hebrew scriptures, "Without a vision, the people perish." And getting to a vision takes time: visions don't often come ready to use.

It is easy for us to see the problems before us, as a community and as a nation. It will take time, and God's inbreaking Spirit, to bring the nation beyond the problems to the new reality. I believe the church is called to lead this transformation; and I believe that THIS church is called to help other churches in that task. But the vision of what that means will come like manna – just enough for the day, and just in time to stave off death by starvation.

Whether it is our search for a new home for our worship, or our commitment to children, or any other part of our call to be church, we need to help each other see that God is the source of our sustenance, even though we need to work every day to pick it up off the ground.

LESSON TWO: We need time and help to understand who God is really calling us to be as a church.

### **3. God met the need as the congregation perceived it with just enough to keep them going:**

*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."*

Waiting isn't easy. We want our problems solved as soon as we are aware of them. But I think that instant visions have little chance of being authentic.

For example, while Bill was in England I took his place at a meeting at the Corporation for National Service. It was a gathering of academics and leaders of professional associations, called together to help plan a "Summit for Our Nation's Future." The summit is scheduled for President's Day next February, in Philadelphia. It will bring together all living U.S. Presidents and their wives with community leaders from across the country, to pledge the nation to goals that would strengthen and unite volunteer efforts all across the country to turn the tide of many of the most serious social problems facing us as a nation. It was an impressive group, and I was prepared to hear the vision for our future. What I heard sounded a lot like, "If only we could return to the solid communities of our past, where there were many people ready and willing to reach out to help each other, we could solve the problems that threaten our society. Or, put another way, "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..." By the end of the day there was no vision, but there were some signs of the common hunger that brings a congregation together. I left with some hope that the journey to a new vision may be possible.

God called the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, but it took them a generation, wandering in the wilderness, to get beyond problem-solving and begin to see and live into the vision that God had provided. They were called to be God's faithful people, and God promised to lead them to a land "...flowing with milk and honey." But it took a long time to get beyond their focus on food and water. Vision did not come with a precise strategy and a neatly bound five year plan. They received their vision like they received their bread – lying all around

hem in the morning after the dew evaporated; just enough for the day. We might say that Moses focused on problem-solving and never did get to the promised land.

The Presidential Summit may offer an invitation to a new vision for America. But the vision may well take a generation to come clear. In the meantime, we can journey together.

LESSON THREE: We shouldn't expect to get enough to finish the job before we start. Manna comes a day at a time.

#### **4. The Israelites needed some help understanding God's gift to them:**

*(I)n 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 upon 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."*

When they looked at this powder, small and flaky, fine as hoarfrost, they didn't see BREAD. It's a common problem. I'm likely to overlook a lot of possibilities if I have a very clear answer in mind. That's why we need lots of people in the process, and why we are committed to shared leadership in Seekers. In our call to be church, we say:

*By shared leadership we mean empowering the gifts of women and men to help our worship flow out of and feed into the life of the community. We are committed to evoking and giving space to new gifts of preaching, liturgical leadership, creative worship forms, giving, mission and other acts of faith.*

That means, we expect to hear the prophetic word from anyone. But, that's easier to talk about than it is to carry out. We keep searching for some way to pull the pieces together. In the Church of the Saviour, and in many of our sister churches

who grew out of that tradition, the corporate mission of the church serves that purpose. In Christ House Church, the mission of Christ House concentrates the sense of need and encourages focus on a common vision for the community. The same is true for most of the others. Dayspring Church, and Lazarus House Church, and Festival Church each have a prominent corporate mission. Seekers has a corporate mission, too, but we do not claim it as the core of our vision. Seekers Church spends as much energy (and more money) on Hope and a Home than many of the other C. of S. churches spend on their defining missions.

Our corporate mission does not define us, because we are called to a more complex existence. Our call to be church says:

*For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness. We desire and welcome participation in Seekers of women and men of every race and sexual orientation. In Seekers Church we will equip and support each other in all of these areas and seek a balance among them.*

It is this element of faith at work in the world that is both central to our call, and the source of our confusion. We need help in seeing clearly who we are called to be. If you see part of the vision, speak up. We're counting on you.

LESSON FOUR: It takes a whole congregation to build a vision.

If you read the rest of the story in Exodus 16, you probably saw another, related lesson:

**5. Each person got just enough, no matter how hard they worked. The head of each household gathered for those in the household, an omer (six pints)**



## **for each:**

*Measuring with an omer vessel, the one who gathered much had none to spare, and the ones who gathered little did not come up short. (Ex 16:18)*

There's an interesting connection here with the Gospel lesson for today – where Jesus likens the realm of God to a landowner who paid those who labored in the fields a full day's wage no matter how long they worked.

One of the characteristics of manna is equity. We talk a lot about how this is a church where everyone is crew – no passengers. That means we're each expected to do what's right for us, not what someone else thinks is right for the community. So, we run the risk of having too many preachers and not enough sopranos. We solve that by having an open pulpit and no choir. And, I hope we listen to each other, and especially to our elders and our children. Our call to be church says:

*Seekers is committed to participation by persons of all ages. We see children, youth and adults of all ages as valuable and valued parts of our community, and desire their inclusion in our care, our ministry, and our life together.*

**LESSON FIVE:** By the grace of God, we each get a full measure from being part of community.

**6. They only got enough for the day, except for the Sabbath, when they got two measures the day before. Any extra wouldn't last through the night:**

*Moses said to them, "Let no one save any of it until morning." But they did not listen to Moses and left some of it 'til morning,, and it grew wormy and rancid. (Ex 16:19-20)*

I think this lesson from the manna is about stewardship. It raises the question of just how much we should keep for ourselves and how much we should make available for others.

How much IS enough? How much is just enough for the day? How much of our lives falls in the "manna" category, to be used as it is given rather than saved for the future?

I am reminded of this lamp, which Marjory's father used to carry to light his way to school in Lynden Washington. It gives off one candlepower of light. You can't see very far with it, but you can see enough to stay out of the puddles and avoid the horse manure in the street. The light won't last very long either. So if the lantern is lit, it's time to be on the way. That's probably lesson enough.

LESSON SIX: If the lantern is lit, it's time to be on the way.

## **CONCLUSION**

I think these six lessons from the manna can be applied in every realm of our lives – impersonal, intimate and interior. Each of these is woven into our life together as a church.

## **THE IMPERSONAL REALM – GLOBAL, NATIONAL AND METROPOLITAN LIFE**

In the world out there, the "impersonal realm" of city, nation and world, we see the needs and we cry out like the Israelites, "O that we had died in the land of Egypt..." It is a world where people struggle to achieve the "American dream," to corner the market on life, and retire to a golf course in Sun City Arizona. The city is being abandoned by the middle class, who can't see how to get what they need from a city in anarchy.

What can we do to focus the awareness of need among those who are lost in a world of materialism and masochism, destroying themselves to collect more than they need and then lashing out in anger when what they have collected is wormy and rancid in the morning?

## **THE INTIMATE REALM – FAITH COMMUNITY AND FAMILY**

Within our families and our worshipping community – the intimate realm – we have the same "manna" questions. This season we are focusing on our recommitment to the call of Seekers Church. Our call is to be part of the Body of Christ in an intentional way.

The Seekers call begins with this statement:

*Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.*

*By "Seekers community" we mean an intentional body which sees Christ as our true life source. Koinonia with one another and genuine self-giving to the world are the ways we can be in Christ today. Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way.*

As part of our preparation for our annual recommitment as a church, the core members have invited all Seekers to reflect on our call and how we are living it out, as individuals and as a community. The full statement is printed in a recommitment reflection guide, which is available on the piano.

We are looking for a home, and we don't have a vision of exactly what we want. Where is the manna in that search?

## **THE INTERIOR REALM – GIFTS, CALL AND MEANING IN LIFE**

In our individual lives – the interior realm – there are manna issues as well. Are you concerned about stewardship, about how much is enough, and what it means to be a good steward of the gifts that God has given to you and your family? If so, I urge you to join the stewardship class in the Seekers School of Christian Living this fall. They will be looking at income and

wealth from a manna perspective. Expect to find answers enough for the day as you share your journey with each other.

Do you need to face the challenge of aging, for yourself or for someone you love? If so, there is an exciting opportunity to do that in community in the other School of Christian Living class. Expect to find manna there as well.

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This is our recommitment season. I invite you to a deeper belonging in this small part of the Body of Christ. The door is open – and the lantern is lit. AMEN.