

Sermon Text (Exodus 16:1–3, 11–20 ESV)

¹ They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “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, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” . . .

¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, ¹² “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³ In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. ¹⁴ And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.’” ¹⁷ And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over till the morning.” ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them.

Jesus Is our Bread from Heaven

The children of Israel had witnessed the glory of God with their own eyes many times by this point. He sent ten plagues on the land of Egypt, none of which affected the Israelites. When the Egyptian army had them cornered at the Red Sea, Moses stretched out his hand over the waters, at God’s command, and they split in two, allowing the Israelites to cross to the other side on dry ground. After the Israelites had safely made it to the other side of the Red Sea, God caused the waters to fall back into place and drown the entire Egyptian army. And finally, after finding bitter water that they could not drink at Marah, Moses threw a log into the bitter water that God showed him, and the bitter water became sweet.

God had shown his glory in how he had taken care of the children of Israel so far, so they had no reason to doubt that he would continue to take care of them. And yet, when they had no food to eat, instead of turning to God for help, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and therefore against God, saying, “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, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (verse 3).

How quickly the children of Israel forgot the glory of God that they had already witnessed many times. They should have known better than to sin against God by grumbling to Moses and Aaron, but they did anyway. How ungrateful the Israelites were! They did not deserve the love and mercy that God had shown them up to this point, and it would have been completely understandable if God gave them what they rightfully deserved and either wiped them out right there or gave them what they wanted and returned them to slavery in Egypt.

However, God didn’t treat the Israelites as they deserved. Instead, he said to Moses and Aaron, “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God’” (verse 12). And everything happened exactly as God said. “In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat’” (verses 13–15). And this wasn’t just a one-time gift from God. God continued to provide the children of Israel with this quail and bread from heaven, which the Israelites called “manna,” throughout the next

forty years of their wandering in the wilderness until God finally led them into the land that he had promised them, the land of Canaan.

It's moments like these that we find in the Bible that we can get really upset at the children of Israel. How could they witness everything that they witnessed and still constantly grumble against God and turn against him over and over again? And we are right to be angry when people treat God that way, but that also means that we should be angry with ourselves.

Even though you have witnessed the glory of God in his Word and Sacrament and in the ways that he continues to provide for you every day, how often do you find yourself grumbling because of the situation that you find yourself in? When something unexpected happens that inconveniences you, do you find yourself getting extremely angry and saying to seemingly no one, "Why did this have to happen now?" When someone at work or school gives you work to do that you don't want to do, do you find yourself grumbling about having to do it, maybe even the entire time that you spend doing the work? When the people around you who are supposed to be the authorities in a certain area make a decision that you don't like or simply don't seem to do enough, do you find yourself complaining to them or about them to other people?

When we find ourselves in situations like those, situations that we don't like and that make us upset, our immediate reaction can more often than not be to grumble and complain about it. However, when we grumble and complain against those in positions of authority, are we not actually grumbling and complaining against God, who gave them that authority? Even when we lift our heads to the sky and seemingly voice our complaints to no one, are we not voicing our complaints to God and blaming him for the situation we found ourselves in? We may be able to relate much more with the children of Israel than we realize, especially with how often we can find ourselves grumbling against God and turning against him, despite knowing better.

Like the Israelites, we don't deserve the love and mercy that God shows us. It would have been completely understandable if God gave us what we rightfully deserved and cast us into the fires of hell for all eternity. But, also like the Israelites, God doesn't treat us as we deserve. Instead, he showed us love and mercy by graciously sending us bread from heaven. However, this bread from heaven was a bit different than the bread from heaven that he sent the Israelites. Jesus said to the crowd that followed him in the verses following our Gospel lesson for today, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" (John 6:49–50). What is this bread that comes down from heaven? Jesus continued, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (John 6:51).

Jesus further explained why he came down from heaven by saying, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:37–40).

Jesus is the Bread of Life that came down from heaven to do the will of his Father, and the will of his Father was that he keep the Law perfectly in our place and die in our place on the cross. Now, if anything was worth grumbling and complaining over, it would be that. Having to be perfect in every way not for your own sake but for the sake of others? Having to suffer and die in the most painful way that mankind can imagine even though you have done nothing to deserve it? To us, it may sound like Jesus had every right to grumble and complain, especially when we have grumbled and complained over far less. And yet, Jesus did not grumble and complain when he found himself

in that situation. Instead, he willingly laid down his own life and suffered hell itself on the cross, the hell that we rightfully deserve for all of the sins that we have ever committed, so that we would not have to suffer it. And Jesus willingly endured all of that so that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Just as God kept sending the bread from heaven to the children of Israel during their wandering in the wilderness until the day that he led them into the promised land, so God keeps sending us Jesus, the living bread from heaven, during our wanderings through this life until the day that he leads us into the promised land of heaven. Jesus has already opened the gates of heaven to us. Now, we just need to complete the long journey to get there, a journey that we could never make on our own. It is only by the grace of God that he leads us to our home in heaven, and he nourishes us with the Bread of Life, which is his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, every step of the way. When our souls hunger, God is there with his Word and Sacraments to give us the Bread of Life again. One of those Sacraments we will partake in shortly, in which Jesus, the Bread of Life, gives us his true body and blood in bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. How gracious our God is to us! We do not deserve this overabundance of food that God feeds our souls, but he gives it to us anyway, because he loves us that much.