

**“What Is It?”**  
**Exodus 16:2-15**  
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The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert.

The Israelites said to them,

*“Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”*

Then the Lord said to Moses,

*“I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.”*

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites,

*“This evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning you will see the Lord’s glorious presence, because your complaints against the Lord have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?”*

Moses continued,

*“The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the Lord heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.”*

Then Moses said to Aaron,

*“Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the Lord, because he’s heard your complaints.’”*

As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

The Lord spoke to Moses,

*“I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread.’”*

*Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.”*

In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp.  
And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp.  
When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground.

When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other,  
*“What is it?”*  
They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them,  
*“This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”*

**The wandering, liberated Israelites are unhappy.**

They’re hungry.  
They’re frustrated.  
They’re whining.  
And they are taking it out on the very people who continue to walk them to freedom.  
Poor Moses and Aaron.  
The Israelites don’t sound like very fun companions for the long journey.

But maybe that’s not totally fair to say.  
I admit that at first hearing, it was tempting to criticize the Israelites’ actions.  
*How can they be so ungrateful?*  
*Aren’t they aware that life now is so much better than before?*  
*How could they possibly even think that life in slavery was better than where they are now?*  
*Don’t they know how good they have it?*  
It is easy for me to think the Israelites are clueless and ungrateful.

And then...I remember the last time I grumbled and complained.  
Not about little things like traffic or slow lines at the grocery store.  
But about something that felt big in life, a time when things weren’t going my way.  
It was much easier to complain than to live into the uncertainty of the moment.  
The self-righteousness that comes with complaining felt much more comfortable and satisfying than trying to be patient with what was going on.

***Has that ever happened to you?***

Have you ever grumbled and whined over a situation that was outside of your control?

I'm guessing yes, which is why I love stories like this one.  
 Our story is real and raw and like it or not, very relatable.  
 It can smack us in the face and make us take a long look at what it means to trust God.

### **What is it about moments of uncertainty that push us to grumble and complain?**

Is it the lack of control in the situation?

A lack of trust that things will actually work out?

Perhaps a deep sense of fear that we won't get what we need or think we deserve?

Though free from slavery, the Israelites find themselves having to rely on God completely.

And I don't think they like it.

But, we see in our story that God does hear the complaints of the Israelites AND responds by giving them what they need--*food*--but not exactly what they want.

And God wants them to know that their complaints have been heard.

God wants his people to know that it was him who met their needs.

After all, God hadn't abandoned them.

But the thin flakes weren't what they were expecting.

And they ask, "***What is it?***"

The Israelites can't quite see yet.

### **What is it about God's provision that can be so hard to see in the moment?**

Is it that it doesn't always look like what we were hoping for?

Or come exactly as we'd like it to come?

Is it because sometimes God's timing doesn't always line up with ours?

Or maybe because it can come through unexpected people in unexpected places?

For the Israelites, they received exactly what they needed, when they needed it.

But by not being able to recognize it, they had to adjust their expectations in order to really appreciate God's provision.

I think faith communities can be like this.

In 2017, it can be easy to look back and complain about how things aren't like they used to be.

We might remember days when going to church was *the thing* that all ages did.

- There were Sunday School classes packed with people.
- Midweek Bible studies or multiple worship services.
- And Sundays were considered sacred days for church, rest and family.

These realizations might make us wonder about our future as a congregation or denomination or even as a country.

We may even feel as though we're doing some wandering of our own through the wilderness.

Or maybe family life looks different than it once did.

- Memories of health or wealth or other forms of security creep into our minds as we're faced with a different reality.
- That relationship that used to be so strong is in now barely hanging on by a thread.
- Perhaps our sense of direction and purpose that used to motivate us feel long gone.

There are so many ways we can experience uncertainty and upheaval, much like the Israelites, and they are real.

And they can be scary.

**And yet, God calls us to open our eyes a little wider and see.**

**Because if we get stuck in our longing for the way things once were,  
we may completely miss the manna**

- the surprising bread from heaven - being offered to us *now*.

*When we look around, where might the blessings and gifts that God has sent, that we don't immediately recognize, be hidden?*

*Where is God raining bread from heaven in our lives right here at Holy Way?*

*And in our individual lives?*

*What about in our community?*

Children of God, the good news is that in our moments of doubt and uncertainty, that can often lead us to grumbling, comes the great abundance and generosity of God.

We may just need to slow down a bit in order to see it.

I would like to close with a poem appropriately titled *Manna*, by Yakov Azriel<sup>1</sup>.

### **MANNA**

*When least expected,*

*The manna*

*Comes.*

*Like a burst of lightning in a moonless desert night*

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<sup>1</sup> *Manna*, by Yakov Azriel, published in *Cross Currents*, 54, no. 1, Spr 2004, pp. 143-144. 2004.

*Suddenly  
Allowing you to see all at once in white  
The deep ravines and gaping canyons,  
The chiseled walls of protruding boulders,  
The strangely sculptured statues of mesas,  
The huge cliffs  
Surrounding you.*

*When the manna comes,  
You taste  
(Instead of the dry rations of stale bread)  
The most exquisite varieties of ice-cream  
And chocolate-covered pastries  
Filled with whipped-cream.*

*When the manna comes,  
You drink  
(Instead of a stingy, measured allowance of stagnant water)  
Bottles and gallons of fruit juices,  
From citrus to mango, from apricot to kiwi.*

*When the manna comes,  
You smell  
The fragrance of incense  
Enwrapping and enveloping you,  
Drifting down from the mountains of myrrh  
And the hills of frankincense.*

*When the manna comes,  
You see  
A black raven perched on a leafless bush  
Transform  
Into a phoenix  
Whose peacock-colored feathers dazzle,  
Unscathed  
By the halo of flames  
Blazing around her.*

*When the manna comes,  
You hear  
The noise of traffic (honking horns, drivers' curses, coughing buses) fade away;*

*Distant symphonies gradually grow louder and clearer  
As chariots of ivory and translucent crystal draw near you,  
Their wheels turning  
Like gears inside a mother-of-pearl music-box,  
Creating crescendos you never heard before:  
The music of chariots driven by hosts of angels.  
Or are these angels just notes of music:  
Semibreves, crotchets, quavers  
Somehow come alive?*

*And when the manna falls, God's fingertips Descend and gently Touch you.*

**“What is it?” the Israelites ask.  
“Bread from heaven,” they hear.  
And it is just what they need.**

**Amen.**