

"He Provided What We Could Not"

"Equally Paid?"

Exodus 16:1-5; Matthew 20:1-8

Before I begin my sermon, per se, I want to share a brief part of my farming history that I hope is pertinent today.

My brother, Jonathan, and I had a formal farming partnership in the 1980's. As with all farmers ours was one of financial ups and downs, lean years and good years. Lean years you hold back on equipment upgrades and good years you upgrade in anticipation of lean years to come. Whether it is the hope and dream of most farmers or not I do not know. But Jonathan and I hoped to one day be financially independent from the bank from whom we of course borrowed operating money. A certain number of potential interest dollars of course go either into the bank's pockets or ours. At one point in time we had several good years back to back, with each successive year having enough income from the previous year such that we didn't have to start borrowing operating money until later and later with each successive year. One year we arrived at late July or early August before we had to borrow operating capital. At that point in the farming season, ALL of our cropping expense, repairs, and other inputs had been paid for out of our own pockets. In our mind's eye Jonathan and I envisioned one more year of the same financial growth. As we envisioned it, the following year we would be able to get one more month ahead, the implication being that when we harvested and sold our first truck load of Great Northern beans we would have money for the next month's living expenses. The beans we sold after that would be sufficient for harvest expenses. And then with the income from harvested corn and sugar beets we would start the process over. The point was we would be financially independent of the bank. It was so close we could taste it.

I can't help but believe at least a few of you are now asking, "So what then went wrong?" You folks have been around the farming game long enough to perhaps guess. You just know something went wrong. Inexplicably, beginning with that first fall the bottom fell out of not just one of our three cash crops, but all of them. Indeed, that downturn would remain down turned the following year. In the end, at the end of that second harvest Jonathan and I couldn't completely pay the bank off. And it wasn't because we got careless with our expenditures, it was just the outcome of market forces outside of our control. [To our great frustration, the bank forced us into taking out an unnecessary FHA loan for that shortfall. But that's another story for another time.]

I tell this brief story for two reasons. First, it is to assure you that I have great empathy and concern for all of you folks. I know something of which you go through, whether hard times are due to poor crop prices or low crop yields. Second, it is because I believe we all have some sense of affinity with our OT lesson. Trusting in God when we don't know where or how we are going to feed ourselves is not always an easy thing. In addition, from time to time we are challenged within ourselves to be grateful for what God has blessed us with, even when some would say we have less reason to be grateful. God had the not so easy task of teaching the Israelites to trust him. "I **WILL** rain down bread from

heaven for you." the LORD said to Moses. [emphasis added] God would indeed provide them manna in the morning and quail in the evening not for a single day, not for a single month, not for a single year, but for every year of their 40 year sojourn in the desert! Would the Israelites learn to trust God? That was the question.

As I began my study of our Scripture lessons, both taken from the Common Revised Lectionary, I searched for a common thread between them. It soon became apparent that there was indeed a common thread and theme. This thread is revealed in our sermon title: "He provided what we could not." The central point of this is that God is the one who provides the very thing we cannot provide for ourselves. Further it is true that God's provision often surprises us in some very surprising and unconventional ways.

Today's story of the Israelites takes up the story shortly after the place we left them last week, Exodus 14. If you remember, though Pharaoh had released the Israelites and they had successfully fled the land of Egypt, nevertheless, they were not out of the woods yet, so to speak. Suddenly, indeed seemingly inexplicably, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to bring them back. "What was I thinking?!" Pharaoh thought to himself. Thus he sent his army to bring them back by force. With this reality closing in from behind the Israelites realized they had an insurmountable barrier in front of them - the Red Sea, which blocked their way forward to full and permanent freedom. As foretold in last week's story they were indeed hemmed in on every side. It would take a Biblical miracle to deliver them from this dilemma. But as we have been told so many times, God is the God of miracles, the God who delivers, the God who does those things we cannot do for ourselves.

I will spare you the details of that deliverance for I assume most of you know it fairly well. For those who do not, I commend the story to you for your delight and edification! It's a delightful story, one that charms and encourages people of all ages. The story of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea charms our hearts and lifts our spirits. Reading the story as we usually do with alacrity and enthusiasm can bring about some true sense of the urgency and the drama. Will they make it? Or will they not? In the end, we find the Israelites on the far side of the Red Sea totally exhausted but relieved and finally safe and secure. And yet, has it dawned on them what really has just happened? The waters of the Red Sea parted? And the sea bed was dry? Whoever has ever seen waters parted as they had just witnessed? Now, dead Egyptians and horses are floating everywhere! Yet, they were undoubtedly free! Their response? They were thrilled beyond thrilled! Chapter 15 tells us of the two songs of praise and gratitude, one led by Moses and the other by his sister Miriam. Even though we didn't read them this morning they provide one of our first take aways. We should always be careful to give God our thanksgiving, praise, and gratitude for what he has done for us! Succinct in her expression of it, "Miriam sang to [the people]: 'Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'" (Exodus 15:21, NIV)

I bring our attention to this high spot in the story because it sets up a clear contrast to what we found in today's story. Freed after some 4 centuries of

slavery by means of a divine deliverance of the most unimaginable kind, one would think the Israelites would have some sense that they could trust the LORD to provide for them the very things they could not provide for themselves. As we know, however, the first time they experienced the next true need they balked, and stumbled. And even the next miracle, God's turning the bitter and unusable water into not simply "potable" water but indeed "sweet" water (15:25), wasn't enough for them. Suddenly faced with no apparent food to eat, they resort to bitter whining and complaining and a rewriting of their history. "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted....." (Exodus 16:3 NIV) This revisionism is curious in that for some strange reason they had suddenly forgotten that they all had just about been worked to death and starved to death. One wonders where this sudden vision of leisurely meals featuring an abundance of meat came from.

Such is the gratitude and short memory of the human creature. And yet, God would continue to provide for them. How merciful and good **is** this God we love, honor, and serve.

As we in Bickleton know by now, this just concluded crop year has been a tough one. It was a crop year that was disappointing, was it not? Some have noted that it was as dry a year as any in quite some time. As I thought about it this past week I couldn't help but remember what I was told of the summer just prior to Jennifer and my coming to Bickleton. Perhaps my memory isn't perfectly correct, but I seem to remember being told that there was a lot of 15 bushel wheat that harvest. I also remember being told you had something like a hundred days of temperatures reaching the 100 degree mark, and that the wind was consistent and strong, thus scorching this land. However accurate or not my memory or knowledge, it sounded like a very trying and brutal year. But as the farmer and rancher must be, by default or at least in principle, some true sense of optimism seems to rule the day. The commonly used maxim "Next year will be a better year" seems to speak to this optimism.

I mentioned last week that the LORD had a monumental task ahead of him in teaching the Israelites to trust him. I wonder if it was a task more difficult than getting us here today to trust him. If we remember, the LORD was teaching them a religious way of life from scratch. They had no religious history from which to remember, study, and learn. It truly was from scratch. We, by contrast, have a long and colorful faith tradition and a huge number of stories and resources from which to remember, study, and learn. We are so blessed to have what we have in terms of history and Scripture! In fact, we have a faith tradition that is as old as the universe itself simply because God has preserved knowledge of it for us in our Scriptures! We have God's Word that teaches us, encourages us, edifies us, and prepares and equips us for all that God has in mind for us. **And we have each other.** We have each other for mutual encouragement and support, not to drag each other down in sorrow and despondency - "Oh, woe is us! If only we had this or that! Oh, woe is us! If only God would do this or that!" We are here to encourage and lift up one another.

This past Tuesday I think I saw for the first time a certain dimension of the Israelites and their life I had never before seen quite so clearly. The text seems

to present a picture of a mass of people wallowing in self pity and anguish, all of them wallowing around together in a sense of hopelessness in spite of the numerous miracles God had recently done on their behalf. "Where were the encouragers?!" I wanted to ask. Thinking of them sitting or milling around, in abject misery and dejection I wanted to ask out loud, "Where is your gratitude and trust?"

On the other hand isn't it also true that it's difficult for us, today, no less than in that earlier day, to really understand what God is up to. The LORD parted the Red Sea, and that after all the miracles that led up to the release of the Israelites. In our day, couldn't God have let loose at least one or two timely rains to water and bring relief to our withering wheat crop and pasture lands?

"In this way [said the LORD] I will test them and see if they will follow my instructions." There seems to be no way getting around the truth that God was putting the Israelites to the test, a test of which we know they will fail over and over. But we must remember that their subsequent failures would not take the LORD by surprise. Rather, **God**... knew all along it would be so. But as surprising as this may seem, there is something of a logic to it all. The time in the desert to come was an on-going training ground for them. This may be somewhat similar to raising our children. We know they will be disobedient, untrusting, and in various ways "failures", but we never bring them to the end of the learning curve. We stick with them the best we can. It is through difficulties and struggles that human beings learn. It was this way for us when we were young.

In the words of one authority, and as another take away, "The desert is a difficult time for the Israelites. **It is easy to condemn them as faithless, but I suspect that many of us** [if we had walked in their shoes] **would not have fared much better.** Life was hard in Egypt, but it must seem harder still in the uncharted desert through which they are traveling. It is not an easy place for them to live, not only because of their harsh surroundings, but also because their only recourse in a barren land is to trust God completely. And if the Bible teaches us anything about human nature, it is that total trust and obedience are rare even in the most godly person." (*The NIV Application Commentary, Exodus*, p. 330, edits mine.)

As I pondered these words, I realized we are offered a couple of take aways here. First, it seems true that we modern people, who have the benefit and advantage of having learned from thousands of years of history with God, as well as having our Bible, a record of God and God's love for people, nevertheless, are likely to be more condemning of the Israelites for their complaining and other failures than we ought to be. **Pared down, we shouldn't be too harsh on them.** We have less reason to complain and not understand God's demand for trust and obedience. They, arguably, had more. They had no written Scripture, nor a long history with the LORD. They, at this point, were merely at the beginning of a long and future history. They, at this point we might say, were barely birthed.

Second lesson: as noted by the author, total and perfect trust and obedience is almost impossible for even the most ardent and disciplined disciple of Jesus.

I wonder, however, if folks who live in rural areas have something of an advantage, not only farmers or ranchers but all who are related to agriculture. As I mentioned, you told me 2015 was one of the most trying years in a long time. The point of this is that you, too, have your desert years no less than did the Israelites. And yet, here you are; here we are. God has sustained us. Having lived through some very strained and difficult farm years myself I, too, know something of the inclination to ask hard questions of God. But here we are nevertheless with the indelible hope that most farmers have, "Well, there's next year." God has supplied what we could not supply ourselves.

This ties in with our Gospel lesson.

This past Wednesday I had the blessing of speaking to the Youth Group about the parables, talking about what parables are and about what their purposes are. I then had the blessing of speaking to them about a particular parable, the parable of the pearl of great value (Mt. 13:45-46). As Alicia had noted earlier, a parable functions to make a particular point. While there are always multiple lessons to be drawn from a given parable, there is always at least one central truth claim Jesus was trying to deliver into the hearts of those who heard him. The tag line in my Bible for our Gospel lesson reads, "Jesus tells the parable of the workers paid equally". Getting down to the most central point Jesus was trying to make, Jesus was saying that it makes no difference at which time of life someone comes to faith in Jesus, whether it is during one's earliest or last days of life, each person receives the same pay - eternal life. God.... provides it!

Some folks have a difficult time accepting the idea that a person can have a late-in-life conversion, or even later in a so-called death bed conversion, and receive the same payment. This doesn't seem fair, as some understand fairness. But we must remember that the Bible isn't much interested in "fairness", at least not as we humans think of "fairness". The Bible is about God's great generosity, about God's provision. And patience. And goodness. And forbearance. And sovereignty!

Oh, there's that word "sovereignty" again! If we read the Gospel lesson farther we find that some of those who were hired first were angry with the landowner paying the late-hires the same amount of money as they were paid. "But he answered one of them, `Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:13-15, NIV)

As a last take away, I want us to consider this. It seems like we are in the middle of a long spiritual drought in terms of Gospel fruit being produced, that is, in terms of people coming to Jesus. This is just a subtle reminder that God is sovereign, and that the parable Jesus told those around him suggested that some will not come to faith in him until later. We often are given in to despair,

wondering what's taking God so long to soften hearts. I'm thinking at this moment of the story of Kai from last week's sermon. [If you remember, Kai went through a terrible early childhood, adolescence, and early adult life, but upon God's providential timing and work, the Holy Spirit softened his heart and he gave his life to Jesus and God's redeeming work in our world.]

What seems like a drought may or may not be so, that is, in spiritual terms. Only God truly knows what the plan is. Ours is to trust and obey, to be grateful for what is and not fret and pine over what is not. One of the great things about this parable of Jesus is that for those of us who have worked in the Lord's vineyard for a very long time, we will receive our payment in full. Jesus has provided what we could not. We have every reason for being grateful, whether in terms of how he helps us through the tough years as with the plentiful years. Amen.