

“What Is It?”

Exodus 16:1-3, 9-15

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The late Episcopal theologian John Claypool once told a story from ancient China about a farmer who owned one horse.

He depended on the horse for everything:
to pull the plow, to draw the wagon.

One day a bee stung the horse,
and in fright the horse ran away into the mountains.

The farmer searched for him but couldn't find him.

His neighbors said,
"We are really sorry about your bad luck in losing your horse."

But the old farmer shrugged and said,
"Bad news, good news -- who is to say?"

A week later his horse came back,
accompanied by twelve wild horses,
and the old farmer was able to corral all these fine animals.

News spread throughout the village,
and his neighbors came and said,
"Congratulations on this bonanza out of the sky."

To which the old man shrugged and said,
"Good news, bad news -- who is to say?"

The only son of the farmer decided to make the most of this good fortune, so he started to break the wild horses so they could be sold and put to work in the fields.

But as he attempted to do this,
 he got thrown from one of the horses,
 and his leg was broken in three places.

When word of this accident spread through the village,
 again the neighbors came saying:
"We are sorry about the bad luck of your son getting hurt."

The old man shrugged and said,
 "Bad news, good news -- who is to say?"

Two weeks later a war broke out among the provinces in China. The army came through conscripting every able-bodied male under fifty.

Because the son was injured, he did not have to go, and it turned out to save his life, for everyone in the village who was drafted was killed in the battle.

"Good news, bad news-- who is to say?"¹

You and I don't always do well with UNCERTAINTY.

We like to know the path.
 We like to pin things down.
 We like an answer about what the future holds.

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this story with me.

The NBA has tried a grand experiment in eliminating uncertainty these days, by playing their playoff games in a so-called bubble at Disney World. No one can leave the bubble—not players, not referees, not the press. Everyone is tested daily for the virus, everyone wears a SENSOR that goes off if you stand closer than six feet from someone else when you're not playing a game.

So far, so good, it seems to be working.

Did they know for sure it would work?

No.

They started their experiment in the shadow of uncertainty.

Which brings us to our text for today.

The Israelites have just been freed from slavery in Egypt.

They're in the wilderness now, being led by Moses.

What happens next?

They're filled with uncertainty!

What sounded like good news—no more Pharaoh—has become bad news...how are we going to eat?

They say, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we...ate our fill of bread; for you [Moses] have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Why be free from Pharaoh, if we're just going to starve?

So Moses talks with God, and God sends the Israelites manna.

Bread from heaven.

Which gives them what they need to survive.

But it also gives them more.
Do you know what manna means in Hebrew?

If you read Ashley Brown's comments on the front of your Harbinger, you know what it means:

What is it?

Manna means, "What is it?"

At one level, that's the Israelites finding bread on ground in the morning, and they remark that they've never seen anything like it before. So they ask one another, "What is it?"

But on another level, that's God feeding the Israelites with a question!

Think about this.

The shadow of UNCERTAINTY surrounds them.

The Israelites have no idea what their future will look like.
They don't know at this point how long they will wander in the wilderness before coming to the Promised Land.

And instead of giving the Israelites a five-point plan,
instead of providing the Israelites with a revelation that says:
this is what it all will mean,
just be patient for the next 40 years...
God gives the Israelites a question.

A daily question.

What is it?

As the President of Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes, points out, that's not just a question about the bread. It's a THEOLOGICAL question. It's a question about what God is doing in their midst.²

What is it that God is doing in the lives of the Israelites, now that God has freed them from the clutches of Pharaoh?

What is it that God is asking of them?

In their moment of uncertainty, God comes to the Israelites not with an answer, but with a question. Manna is the way in which God is appearing to them, leading them, loving them, feeding them:

What is it?

What is it that God is up to?

All this, in my mind, does not sound too terribly far from where we are right now. You and I know something about uncertainty these days, right?

How long will the pandemic last?

We don't know.

It's uncertain.

We know it will end.

We know this is a TEMPORARY situation that we're living through...but we're all living in it much longer than any of us were expecting back when it changed our lives last March.

² Dr. Barnes preached on this text at a Festival of Homiletics conference many years ago, which is where I first heard this point made about the meaning of the word "manna".

And we've all had to learn how to tolerate more uncertainty
than we ever wanted to tolerate.

Uncertainty is what you and I try to avoid.
Not knowing is what makes our lives feel unstable.
It was that way too with the Israelites long ago.
So why would God do it?

Why would God lead the Israelites into the wilderness, a true
desert of uncertainty, and feed them every day not with an answer for
their fears, but with a question?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote:

“I believe that God will give us all the strength we need...But
[God] never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not
on him alone.”³

Maybe that's why God gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness.

So that they would know that God was indeed a God of
ABUNDANCE, that God can see things, imagine things, that they could
not see or imagine. But the abundant grace of God was not theirs to
control or put in the bank or manipulate. They had to trust that God
would feed them with manna—God's grace—every single day.

God's grace does not always come in the ways we would like it to
come.

³ As quoted in “God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas,” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, compiled and
edited by Jana Riess, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

God's grace does not always come in the form of an answer.
Sometimes, God's grace comes to us in the form of a question.
Has that ever happened to you?

When the author Isabel Allende's daughter, Paula, died of a rare blood disease at the age of 28, Allende's entire life came to a halt.

She writes:

“Those were years of confusion and sadness... Without even being aware of it, I dressed all in black. I tried to write, but it was a futile attempt: I would spend hours staring at my computer or pacing my studio, blocked.”

Then, after three years of “emotional paralysis,” Allende took a trip to India with her husband and another friend. One day their guide was driving them down a dusty, country road when they saw a group of four women and some children standing under a solitary tree, out in the country, in the middle of nowhere.

Allende asked the driver to stop, and she approached the women.

They did not share a common language, but they still communicated with one another—first through smiles, then with the Indian women reaching out and touching Allende's clothing, her face.

She and her friend gave the Indian women their bracelets, which they gratefully put on and wore.

Then it was time to go.

As Allende was leaving, one of the women gave her what appeared to be a tiny package. But when Allende looked inside, it wasn't a package—it was the woman's baby daughter!

She wanted Allende to take her daughter back with her, to give her a better life. The driver saw what was happening and, very swiftly, ran from the car to Allende, taking the child and giving the child back to her mother.

Allende writes:

“What happened that day beneath the...tree loosened the knot that had been choking me...

“In that moment I remembered that when [Paula] was alive I would often call her for advice...and her answer would always come in the form of a question:

‘Mother, what is the most generous thing [you can] do...?’

“I had an account with untouched savings that I was planning to invest in something that would make Paula proud...”

On the way back home, Allende announced to her husband and her friend that she would start a foundation to help women and children.⁴

It was a defining moment in Allende’s life.
A turning point.

A moment grounded not in the decision she made, but in the question her daughter always asked her—what’s the most generous thing you can do?

⁴ From “Who Wants a Girl?”, by Isabel Allende, found in *Better Than Fiction: True Travel Tales From Great Fiction Writers*, edited by Don George, Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2012.

Has God ever come to you, fed you, loved you in the form of a question?

I've been thinking about Paula Allende's question, "What's the most generous thing you can do in whatever situation you're in?"

I've been thinking about that question this past week, in light of the events in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and the shooting of Jacob Blake.

Many times over the past three months, I've heard people ask, "What can I do?"

What can I do to help fight racism, or to work for social justice?

It's a good question.

Not a bad question.

But I wonder if there's an even higher question that you and I are called to ask.

When it comes to working for social justice in our community and taking action to get rid of racism in our country—I wonder if the question is not simply what can I do, but what's the most generous thing I can do?

I don't just mean generosity with money.

I mean generosity of time, of energy, of a willingness to listen,
of heart and mind and soul.

Vincent Harding, who died six years ago, was a veteran of the Civil Rights movement. In an interview not too long before he died, he recalled the following story:

“Someone was writing recently making fun of ‘a Kum Ba Yah moment.’ Whenever somebody jokes about Kum Ba Yah, my mind goes back to the Mississippi summer experience where co-workers were coming from all over the country, to come and help in the process of voter registration and taking great risks on behalf of the transformation of that state and this nation.

“The first week of orientation was the week in which [Michael] Schwerner and [Andrew] Goodman and their beloved brother Jimmy [Chaney] were there. And it was during the time that they had left the campus that they were first arrested and then released and then murdered.

“The word came back to us that the three of them were missing,” Harding remembers.

“And we got up and told these hundreds of young people that, if any of them felt at this point they needed to return home, we would not think the less of them at all.

“We said, ‘Let’s just take a couple of hours just for the people to make this decision and make it now.’”

“What I found,” Harding said, “as I moved around among the small groups was that, in group after group, people were singing:
Kum Ba Yah: come by here, my Lord,
someone’s missing, Lord, come by here.

We all need you, Lord, come by here.”

“I could never laugh at 'Kum Ba Yah moments' after that," Vincent Harding said, "because I saw then that almost no one went home from there. They were going to continue on the path.”⁵

For those civil rights activists, it was a path that was still filled with MUCH uncertainty.

But it was the right path.

What about your path?

When it comes to working for social justice,
or when it comes to creating unity in a divided society,
or when it comes to walking with someone whose life has
been overturned by this pandemic...

there's something GENEROUS that all of us can do.

That something may differ, from person to person.

The most generous thing you can do,
in your life, at this moment...what is it?

Amen.

⁵ From Vincent Harding's interview with Krista Tippett on her podcast "On Being," found at <https://onbeing.org/programs/vincent-harding-is-america-possible/>.