

### Free Food

-Just out of college I lived with the Aitkens. They were a family from University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. I was an intern in youth ministry. While living there, Marti Aitken told me a story about a time when she was sitting at their kitchen table with a pre-school aged Jeff sitting in her lap. Jeff had a puzzle spread out in front of him, working on it with squinty eyes. And Marti was reaching around his little arms, silently guiding pieces of the puzzle into their approximate positions so Jeff could more easily find them and put them into place. Jeff became increasingly agitated with the difficulty of the task, sighing in frustration. Finally, as he snapped the last piece into place, he wheeled around on Marti's lap, looked up at her, and huffed: 'Mom, the *least* you could do is *help* me!'

Marti Aitken said she was shocked right into a deeper recognition of Who God is and Who we are as the children of his lap.

Today we encounter a story about God's call to trust in his provision for the way forward, even when it's unclear how all the pieces will come together.

Cast: Moses & three Grumbling Israelites

Context: Six weeks after the Israelites have been set free from slavery, they wander in the desert

*(A grumbling Israelite – three different cast members - challenge Moses on the food crisis. Moses stays upbeat, with occasional appropriate sarcasm!)*

Israelite: I'm hungry.

Moses: Yep.

Israelite: We're all hungry.

Moses: I can see that.

Israelite: You'll have to do something.

Moses: Me? Why me?

Israelite: Because this is all your fault, that's why.

Moses: No, it isn't.

Israelite: Yes it is. You brought us out here!

Moses: No, I didn't!

Israelite: Yes you did. You and your grand, stupid idea.

Moses: It wasn't my idea.

Israelite: So why did you do it?

Moses: I didn't do it. God did it.

Israelite: But you told us everything would be alright.

Moses: No, I didn't. I had no idea what would happen.

Israelite: But you've wandered about in places like this before.

Moses: Yep, I've been in the desert more than the rest of you...

Israelite: You knew there would be no food here.

Moses: Yep, I knew there's not much to eat in a desert...

Israelite: So it's your fault we're all hungry!

Moses: I'm hungry too. What do you want me to do?

Israelite: You could take us back to Egypt.

Moses: Great idea.

Israelite: Find us some food then.

Moses: That's not my job.

Israelite: Well, whose job is it?

Moses: It's God's job. Go complain to God.

Israelite: What's God going to do about it?

Moses: God's going to feed you.

Israelite: What makes you say that?

Moses: God told me.

Israelite: God told you he's going to feed us?

Moses: Yes.

Israelite: When?

Moses: Tonight.

Israelite: What about tomorrow?

Moses: Yep, he'll feed you tomorrow too.

Israelite: What about the next day?

Moses: Yep. And the day after that.

Israelite: Is that a promise?

Moses: Food is on its way. Promise.

Israelite: From where?

Moses: From heaven.

Israelite: From heaven? How can you get food from heaven?

Moses: Same way as you get rain from heaven, or so God tells me.

Israelite: How are you going to do that?

Moses: I keep telling you, I'm not going to do anything. God's going to do something.

Israelite: How can you believe that?

Moses: How can you believe we got out of Egypt?

Israelite: Well, I suppose, because we're here, aren't we?

Moses: And some food is about to be here too.

Israelite: What kind of food?

Moses: Some kind of bread, I think, and some kind of meat.

Israelite: No melons? No cucumbers?

Moses: You can always go back to Egypt for some of them.

Israelite: I didn't really mean the bit about Egypt.

Moses: You don't say...

Israelite: What if there's no bread or meat tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day?

Moses: (*shrugging*) Don't blame me.

(applause?)

OK. A month and a half after leaving Egypt as a band of refugees - after 6 weeks on a journey toward the Mountain of God (Horeb or wasteland), the Israelites come to the wilderness of Sin. And the people say: 'Moses! You've gotta be kidding! It would've been better to die as slaves with a ration of meat and bread. You've brought us out here to die of hunger in the desert. Didn't we *tell* you to leave us be, that this whole plan was futile? The *least* you could do is help us.'

I spoke to a Jewish friend about this passage years ago. He said the people were 'kavetching.' Can you hear the broken spirits of their slavery talking? The people who had just experienced ten wonders of God to set them free from Pharaoh. The people who had just walked on dry ground through the parted waters of the Red Sea and seen those waters crash over the chariots of their oppressors. The Israelites were exhausted and hungry. And they began to despair. They were kavetching.

And their kavetching comes under a well-known category for those who observe human behavior. And that's just this: A *known* slavery is often preferred to an *unknown* freedom. The devil you *do* know is often better than the angel you don't. We'd often prefer another day in our too-small life to the risk of journeying through the wilderness toward freedom.

Now Scripture tells us that the people of Israel didn't head home to the land of promise by the easiest route along the coast of the Mediterranean. Why? Because God was concerned that the Philistines would crush them and send them running back to slavery in Egypt. He called them to freedom. He called them to the wilderness. To protect them. To provide for them. It was like he was taking the puzzle pieces and pushing them into place. But the people couldn't *see* that. They couldn't *see* the arms of the Lord reaching around them to take care of them like little children on his lap. All they could see was the terrifying wilderness stretched before them in the sixth week of their journey. Wouldn't it be better they wondered to work for Pharaoh and know where their next meal was coming from?!

A known slavery is often preferred to a promised freedom. No matter how constricting or empty. Do you agree?

Especially when that freedom is so *strange*. So counter-cultural.

Think about the growing strangeness of Christian freedom. Christians struggle to believe we are most free within the limitations of Christ's calling and command. That following Christ may leave us hungrier but healthier than feeding on the lies of our culture.

In a culture that increasingly believes marriages are of peripheral importance, we Christians struggle to believe relationships and sexuality and families are actually *more* free within the limits of a forever ring around our finger.

In a culture that increasingly believes we have to keep every option open for every activity and invitation, for every expression of individuality; in a culture less and less likely to

make commitments, Christians struggle to believe our children and families are actually *more* free within the limits of belonging to Christian community.

In a culture that increasingly believes Christ's call to humility, fidelity and honesty are quaint by-gones of the 'real' world, Christians struggle to believe we are actually *more* free within the limits of Christ-honoring integrity.

It's not us against them. We are just as much a part of shaping our culture as anyone else. It's just hard to swim upstream. So hard to trust that the pleasures of the life-giving Spiritual life are paradoxically found in deep commitments that limit us to a particular person, a particular place, a particular vocation, a particular community. So hard to trust that saying No to some things means an emphatic and joyful Yes to the best things.

The Israelites threw out the possibility they might be better off in Pharaoh's Egypt than God's desert. Will we prefer the devil we know to the angel we don't?

In this story, God calls us to trust that when we follow God, even when the way looks like wilderness, God will feed us there. God will satisfy us with good. God will reach around us to bring the puzzle together for our very best.

And that's what happens. The people kvetch. They blame their fear on Moses. 'You're trying to kill us, here.' But Moses points them to God. And God responds with generosity, building their trust: 'I am going to rain down bread from heaven, enough for each day.'

Just to be clear this is *not* what you want to do when your children complain. What you *want* to do is send them back to Egypt or feed them dirt.

But God. *God* provides. God blesses. In their desert. Despite their kvetching.

It's a mysterious grace. Manna.

Like a fall of yellow leaves. Enough for the day.

*Give* us this day our daily bread, we pray.

Do not worry about tomorrow, says Jesus.

For tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

And if you can trust it, and even when you can't,

I will provide enough, I will *be* enough for the wilderness you face today.

-Friends, what are the deep commitments Christ is calling you to make – to spouse, to vocation, to church, to community? The strange ones that seem harder than the steady meal plan in Egypt?

Can you trust that in calling you to deeper love, deeper dependability, deeper integrity, deeper fidelity, God is leading you to your real freedom? Can you silence your complaining and blaming about what you lack? Can you trust the Lord to feed your hunger? That God is the one helping to put the pieces of the puzzle together for your good

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-Let's pray.