

Sunday, September 18, 2011: Exodus 16:2-15

by [Ted Wardlaw](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue

When we speak of manna from heaven, we usually do so with a big helping of irony. In our time, the term has come to mean "something that's unheard of and unachievable."

As a seminary president, I sometimes sit with a donor and describe this or that new building or new faculty chair in the hope that the person will be moved to spectacular generosity. Occasionally I receive a skeptical question instead: "How do you expect to pay for this—with manna from heaven?" Manna from heaven, we think, is as likely to fall into our laps as pigs are likely to fly.

If we have misunderstood this text from Exodus, maybe we can be forgiven for it. Exodus is, after all, a catalogue of extraordinary things—the burning bush, the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, the glory of God entering the tabernacle—it's as if the point of Exodus is to spoil us with evidence of the extraordinary ways in which God interacts with God's people.

But the provision of manna is a plain, homely gesture. In the face of complaints from the hungry Israelites who are longing for the fleshpots of Egypt, God acts and provides them with (drum roll, please) . . . bread. There are no fancy pyrotechnics, no strobe lights or fog machines, but just the daily provision of one of the most basic staples of life, something that will get them from today to tomorrow.

In Terry Fretheim's commentary on Exodus, he offers an explanation for this bread that corroborates its everyday ordinariness. In the Sinai Peninsula, "a type of plant lice punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives, who bake it into a kind of bread." Maybe that's all there is to it. But in the story, for people hungry enough to notice, this ordinary food—given to them day by day as a completely unearned gift—is linked with the miraculous generosity of God. It is right that the people perk up at the sight of it and ask, "What is it?" What is this extraordinarily ordinary thing which God gives us in such

abundance?

It is bread, a homely example of the smorgasbord of giftedness that surrounds us. Such giftedness does not save itself for mountaintop moments but rains on us constantly. "Give us this day our daily bread," we say in the Lord's Prayer, as we acknowledge that we depend on the grace of a gracious God whose provisions never fail—unlike our attempts at providing for ourselves.

We preach to people who, like the Israelites in the wilderness, are either so preoccupied by past experience or so anxious about the future that they are often unable to see the graces available to them in the present moment. They are unlikely to ask the incredulous, grateful question: "What is this?"

In the Lowcountry of South Carolina, there is an old Gullah term for early morning: *dayclean*, as in "Child, you've got to go to bed because dayclean's coming." The point is that every new day is "clean"—a blank slate upon which the story of new mercies yet undiscovered might be written. If we are not preoccupied by the past or troubled by the future, we will see the day for the miraculous thing that it is—in the face of the child sitting at the breakfast table, or in the gift of work to do and the opportunity to do it well, or in friends who shoulder our pleasures and burdens with us and help make them meaningful. Nothing special—just ordinary gifts around us that enable us to get from today to tomorrow.

I am a huge fan of Alexander McCall Smith's series of books chronicling the adventures of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. They are delightful doxologies about life in Botswana, especially as expressed by the eminently sensible protagonist, Precious Ramotswe—a "lady detective" who solves crimes. In one book, Smith captures her in a reflective moment.

It was late summer, and there had been good rains that year. This was important, as good rains meant productive fields, and productive fields meant large, ripened pumpkins. . . . The yellow flesh of a pumpkin or a squash, boiled and then softened with a lump of butter (if one's budget stretched to that), was one of God's greatest gifts to Botswana. (*The Full Cupboard of Life*)

Sometimes recognizing the evidence of the most basic, ordinary, daily examples of God's miraculous manna in our midst, upon which we simply depend, is about as simple—and as profound—as that.