

God comes through (Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15)

The One who promised Moses perpetual presence is apparently someone to be trusted.

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August 3, 2018

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Although this is not one of the more famous “testing” texts of the Wilderness Wanderings—God testing the people or vice-versa—it is reminiscent of them. There’s a fair amount of murmuring afoot, and the mob—still in the infancy of becoming a people—is clearly not too sure about this God whom Moses proclaims and in whom he seems to have a growing sense of trust. So they push and agitate. To be on the safe side, their initial murmuring has been directed at Moses and Aaron, but the clear culprit is the One who sent them off into nowheresville in the first place.

You’d think they might have learned by now. They cried out because of their misery in servitude and, hey, presto: God heard and God acted. Up pops Moses, reluctant but faithful leader. There was the crazily improbable release by Pharaoh after a few false starts (even if it was second guessed), not to mention the eerily selective plagues.

And now, having just escaped the Egyptians, having just walked through the miraculously obliging sea, they pause for the first time on their trek to the Promised Land. And complain. And God comes to the rescue again; this is now becoming something of a pattern. The God who promised perpetual presence to Moses back at the bush in chapter 3 is apparently someone to be trusted. Complaint does not, as one might imagine, provoke divine wrath. In fact, this kind of angst-filled murmuring—born of simple need, not of crass desire—is just the sort of thing that

gets God's attention more often than not. Or it will until the Sinaitic covenant, when everything will change for them as well as for their God.

For anyone paying attention to the story thus far, the God of the Promises, who had been noticeably absent and curiously silent through a few hundred years of the people's bondage, is active again, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, rescuing from oppression and foe. On this occasion, lavish (if a tad strange) edibles are provided, one of several examples of divine magnanimity in the Bible. This God is in the nurturing business, big time. This is not, however, a spoon-feeding God.

Ankle deep in quail and mystified by manna, the people's first act after liberation from slavery is cooperation. In order to eat their fill, they must work together to gather provisions, and the manna requires special care. Embryonic freedom apparently implies accountability. Now they're the ones who must create a sustainable economy out in the middle of nowhere. They're in the first stages of building community, of learning what it takes to be community. This is how a people is formed, through the hum-drum stuff, the chores and to-do lists of everyday life. It's in the wilderness that they have to re-invent themselves, undergo the transformation from slaves responsible only to the Machine into a people responsible to themselves, to each other, to their God.