From Manna to Monsanto: The Journey
Rev. Melanie A. Oommen
Exodus 16
July 13, 2014

It is a challenge to pack a big enough picnic for 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. There is no water bottle big enough, nor sandwiches sufficient for such a journey. The issue of thirst had been satisfied in Exodus 15, the previous chapter: a kind of wood thrown by Moses into bitter water miraculously turned the water sweet and satisfying.

But what about food? The Israelites question is an age-old question. It gets asked at my house on a daily basis: What is there to eat, anyway? One month from the beginning of the Exodus from Egypt someone opened the cooler and it was empty, empty, empty. Like their bellies.

“You set us free, God, and now you are killing us with hunger like we never had in captivity. It would have been better that we never left Egypt.” That is how hungry these people were.

Can we blame them? There is such urgency in physical hunger. It overwhelms the mind and spirit. All of that faithfulness that God had shown through plagues and floods and armies and thirst was forgotten. “Our stomachs are empty and surely this is the final and definitive sign that God has abandoned us. If you don’t answer quickly, God, and show some real results, all the ground to freedom that we have gained will be lost. Only a month out of captivity and we are ready to go back to slavery. At least in Egypt they feed you.”

It isn’t just on the road to the Promised Land, or at my house, but all over the world each and every day the question is posed: what are we going to eat? It is a big question. The answer to that question has significance for our sense of purpose, for health and well-being certainly, for us and the generations to come, and profound implications for the health of the planet. How we approach that question: the moral and material landscape in which we establish ourselves as we decide from where our food comes from; the way it is produced and prepared; the intention with which it is consumed; matters deeply. And this ground has shifted and moved over the course of human history. But the need to feed our bodies is constant. Hunger is a daily constant of our Creator-designed anatomy. The question cannot be dismissed.

We have come a long way from the days of manna, and we have not. But 20th century population growth and the growth of biotechnology and corporate food production brought an unprecedented shift in our answer to the question and in how we feed and don’t feed the human race and all things living.

We need only to look to our own recent history of food production to see that the journey with food has shifted ground. I have always appreciated my Mom’s stories of growing up on an Ohio farm during the depression. There were nine people in the family, but they never thought of themselves as poor because they owned land on which they could grow their food. They were never hungry. Cane sugar was a rare and expensive commodity, but there was sorghum for molasses and honey from the hives to sweeten food. There were potatoes stored in the root cellar and apples wrapped in newspaper that would last through the winter. I have a ceramic crock – it holds the dog toys now – that my grandmother used to ferment sauerkraut that would keep without refrigeration. They raised dairy cows and pigs so there was plenty of protein. Grapes and pears and peaches were harvested and canned. Everyone in the family, including dogs and cats, worked hard and constantly to ensure there was enough. And there was always just enough and not too much. Each calorie counted for something, was earned and had value for the body, and was not empty. Salt and sweeteners were not the main ingredients in foods. The source of each food was known well and understood. The cycle of life was honored through what we now call organic practices – manure for fertilizer and nothing else, weeds were plowed under, not sprayed, though tractors were gratefully introduced and eased the burden of such work immeasurably.
I, too, was raised on a farm with big gardens and livestock, and for that I am so grateful. Food was fresh and delicious, nutritious and plentiful. But unlike the generation before, we supplemented our food supply with a weekly trip to Krogers. Unlike my Mom’s childhood, we bought our milk at the store. My mom was clear that she did not want to be tied to home, as was her experience growing up on a dairy farm where the cows had to be milked twice a day. We cannot under estimate the amount of time and effort required to eat off the land. And traditionally the food preparation and preservation fell to women who increasingly were needed to carry other responsibilities as well. Women of my mom’s generation journeyed in part to greater liberation through the introduction of “convenience” foods – neat little boxes of jello lined up in the drawer, store-bought canned meats, vegetables and fruits, pre-made sauces and soups, bread from the store, and pasta dried in plastic wrapping – these were all a source of liberation for homemakers in the 1950s and on.

Thanks to petroleum and the “green revolution” of agricultural technology, global food production changed shape and focus and became complex in politics and economic interest. Farming became a corporate enterprise, and Monsanto shifted from being a chemical and plastics producer to biotechnology on a global scale. Somewhere along the way, big business noticed that those who journeyed were held captive by their hunger. They – we – became consumers in the most complete definition of the word.

Somewhere along the way of new found freedom and greater production, we lost our way. We lost our connection to the Source of all that sustains us. The food that God would provide in just the right measure, like manna for the Israelites, gave way to too much for some and far too little for others.

At some point we looked up, looked around, and asked, “What are we going to eat???” Like the Israelites, our complaints are directed to one another, to those we see and those we can only imagine are engineering systems of which we have no choice but to participate. We analyze and lament how we are caught in the web of complicity. Like Paul last week, we do what we don’t want to do – participate in a food system built on a crumbling foundation. So more often than not we deny that it fails us. Or we are so overwhelmed that we don’t know what to do so we live with a permanent sense of “not-rightness.”

What wisdom guides us from this text? When the Israelites complained to brothers Moses and Arron in their new-found freedom, they were reminded that their complaints were not about Aaron and Moses, but involved the very Creator of the Universe. It became a matter of faith, not solely a matter of the stomach. The moment the Israelites became disconnected from their story of liberation, the moment they forgot that their physical needs were bound to their spiritual inheritance . . . that was the moment they became enslaved again – not to Pharaoh, but to their own fears. We have come this way on our journey, too – desperately believing that there isn’t enough and enslaved by an empire that delights and benefits when we believe that we won’t have enough.

From manna to Monsanto – how did we get from there to here anyhow? How did local food economies transform to a global food economy dependent on fossil fuels for fertilizer, production, and transportation? When did we stop paying attention to the creator of all that sustains us and create food systems that are dependent on fossil fuels (for production, transport, and packaging)? In light of the critical need to move away from fossil-fuel dependency for the preservation of the human race and all creation, what we have created is not sustainable or healthy. And millions on our planet remain food insecure on a daily basis, including in our own community. The way we are feeding ourselves, our food system, is broken and unsustainable, and we cry out in great complaint. We know something is terribly wrong. We know that to thrive, let alone survive, we must make dramatic changes in what and how we eat.

Moses, through Aaron his spokesperson, said, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.” Such is our dependence on the Holy. And when we forget or deny such dependence on the Source, we get lost. We lose our footing. And we grow hungry for something that no food can provide.
For the Israelites, it was as simple as a promise: God said, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”

What wisdom is there for us? There is an invitation here to re-orient ourselves and to rise to the moral requirement of this age. We know that my buying vegetables from local farmers in and of itself will not subvert the corporate food economy. But what if it were to become for me a spiritual practice, a way of seeing God as the Source and the Sustainer of all that is? And a daily reminder of the care with which God tends to us, as God’s faithfulness in all things.

What if taking the time to prepare a simple but homemade meal and share it with others were a sacrament, allowing the Divine to find expression in the most ordinary of activities?

What if picking berries and growing tomatoes were an act of devotion, a way to form ourselves in the very image of our God who is the preserver and sustainer of all life?

What if getting to know the farmer who grows the food I eat, to care about the conditions in which she works, to understand the farming practices he uses, were as much a part of my spiritual practice as is honoring the Sabbath and giving alms?

What if learning about food policies and practices of our government were not just a responsibility for good citizenship, but a form of prayer and devotion to the God of all life?

What if we allowed the sacrament of Holy Communion to form our eating practices, if each meal were approached with intention to connect with all of God’s family, ingested with love, digested with the blessing of wholeness and forgiveness?

We are learning on this journey that when we disconnect our bodies and appetites from the Holy, we disconnect from the very Source and Creator of Life. Our own faith tradition provides us a road map on which to navigate this complex and baffling food economy.

What if we began anew with faithfulness and hope as our compass, reminded that abundance is not our right and entitlement, but pure, flowing grace which we can never earn on our own?

Then, with a renewed sense of humility, we could welcome others to the table for God’s never-ending feast.