**Focus Questions**

1. Do you see God as unchanging? Why or why not?

2. How can God be "unchanging" and yet also be "what God will be"?

3. Why do you think the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years?

4. What is a "zone of bereftness" in the story of your life?

5. How would the world be different if everyone observed the sabbath?

**Reflection**
by Kate Huey

When God met Moses up on that mountain and gave him his assignment to bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, Moses (perhaps gingerly) asked for God's name: who might he say sent him on such a bold mission? While God's response is translated in various and interesting ways, most often as "I Am Who Am," another version is particularly fitting for our story today: "I will be who I will be." Someone has rendered this as "I will be what is needed at the time." The wilderness in today's passage provides a perfect setting for God to be exactly that: just what the people need at that moment in time.

First, Gerald Janzen gives us a little background on the development of the faith of the Israelites from the first book of the Bible to the second: their ancestors in Genesis had worshipped God as "El Shaddai," the source of the blessings of fertility--fields for planting, pasture for flocks, children for the future (and the work of the present)--a fertility that provided food to sustain them. That's what they needed at the time, and it was the most pressing issue on their minds. By Moses' time, as we know from our recent weeks' readings, the most pressing issue for the Israelites was the slavery that held them in bondage to Pharaoh, and as they groaned in their suffering, they prayed to God for release. By the time of Moses, God claimed the name "Yahweh," heard the people's groaning and their prayers, and did indeed free them from the mighty empire of Egypt.

Unfortunately, this freedom led them directly into the wilderness, not directly into the Land of Milk and Honey. (Wouldn't the Land of Milk and Honey have been nice? But then where would the lessons be?) So once again, now that Pharaoh and his chariots are floating on the Red Sea, the most pressing issue for the Israelites is food, and this wilderness doesn't look too promising to deliver it. "In such a setting," Janzen writes, "a warrior God seems of little relevance, and Yahweh ('I will be who/what I will be') needs to be present and active in the old character of El Shaddai...." And what the people needed from God at that moment was food.

Manna means "What is it?"

The word "manna" is familiar to most folks even in the secular world as a metaphor for any miraculous, happy gift--"bread from heaven" can mean unforeseeable but needed blessings that rain down upon us, a lovely image indeed. But this original manna story is told in hard and gritty circumstances, in a barren wilderness that makes the former slaves look backward (toward Egypt, toward slavery) with mixed feelings. Scott Hoezee describes those feelings well: "In the throes of disappointment (not to mention the swooning force of the sun beating down on one's head), mind and memory can play tricks on a person. In the case of Exodus 16, Egypt strangely transmogrifies from the 'house of bondage and the land of death' into some kind of Club Med." There, in the looking backward longingly and looking forward anxiously, is the tension in the wilderness for the Israelites, and the tension in the wildernesses of our lives, too.

Whatever obscure theological categories and impressive jargon we may use to describe our own spiritual development (and where we are at this point in time), it's true that things like bread and water are at the center of our most meaningful religious experience. Last week, the waters of the Red Sea could represent every seemingly insurmountable barrier, every intimidating circumstance, when we feel "up against it." On the other hand, as Christians, we experience the waters of new life in baptism, and we listen to stories about Jesus walking on the water and changing water into wine. (Can you feel the tension between those images, some threatening, and others graced?)

Faith is a physical thing, too

Today's story, however, is about bread, the basic "stuff" of life (even though we know we don't live by it alone). Walter Brueggemann writes of "the deep materiality of our faith," an earthiness, if you will, "that begins in the valuing of creation and culminates in the incarnation, a materiality that knows all along that our bodies count decisively." While our religious practices often point us to heaven and to invisible, "spiritual" things, Brueggemann finds great spiritual meaning in something as ordinary and everyday as food. And the source of our food has greater significance than we may imagine. "What happens to our bodies?" he asks. "On the one hand they take in food. We must eat. On the other hand the food that is eaten is transformed into loyalty, energy, work, and care. The one who provides the food we eat governs the loyalties we embrace."

Whose food do we eat?

In his many reflections on this manna story, Brueggemann often makes the connection between our loyalties and the source of our food--is it Pharaoh and his system, or is it God, who gives in abundance but calls us to walk in faith, in trust, not hoarding but sharing to make sure everyone has enough? As we know after several weeks of exodus stories, "Pharaoh" can stand for more than a long-ago, long-dead historical king. "Pharaoh" is everything that traps us and keeps us down and draws us into a system that mangles the "system" of God, which tests us, perhaps, and lays great expectations on us: will we trust in God's providence? Will we share with one another? Fear and anxiety, which disable trust, keep us strangely trapped and tied to the systems that oppress all but the few at the top. We find ourselves identifying with that system, whether we realize it or not: are we people of Pharaoh, or people of God? Brueggemann warns, then, that "we must pay attention to what we eat and to who feeds us."

So the people of Israel have gone from one challenge to another: "The first task is leaving; the second task is believing," Brueggemann says. We face the same challenges, perhaps in different ways, and God is there, to be What God Will Be, as we face those challenges. It became clear, out there in the desolate wilderness, where abundance was hard to see, let alone taste, that life wasn't going to be suddenly easy, and that freedom itself provided huge problems. The tension between the security of slavery and the gift of freedom is exposed in their question to Moses and Aaron about bringing them out to the wilderness to die. According to Hank Langknecht, "Misery and fulfillment will be part of either life. Which misery is the more bearable misery; which fulfillment is the more fulfilling?"

The anxiety and fear felt by those hungry Israelites in the stark wilderness may sound a bit distant from our own, well-fed experience (at least for some of us, but certainly not for all of God's children). However, we all spend time in both places, the wilderness and the land promised to us--times when God seems far away, and times when we feel secure and blessed, and God seems close at hand. Brueggemann draws a distinction between the concerns of those who have reached The Promised Land and those who were lost, hungry, and uncertain in the wilderness on their way. "In the wilderness, the primary concern is anxiety about survival; in the land, the temptation is complacency about self-sufficiency. The story of manna is not for all of life. It is for life in those zones of bereftness when the problem is not self-sufficiency but despair, need, and anxiety." At one time or another, all of us experience those "zones of bereftness," and that includes Christians, Scott Hoezee writes: "Even for those who know and accept the good news of the gospel, there can still be the wasteland of depression and the scorching sand of cancer."

"Alternative bread"

It's not difficult for Christians to see the line that goes from Moses and manna to Jesus on a hillside responding to his agitated disciples about the hungry crowds. Brueggemann urges us to reflect on "alternative bread," blessed and broken bread, not the controlled bread of a controlling emperor. (We might also consider our "Inner Pharaoh" that tells us to fend for ourselves, and leads us to believe that we can.) As Christians, we remember bread shared long ago, and in the Eucharist is "the relentless enactment of our conviction that only broken bread feeds, only poured out wine contains the power of new life." An entire sermon could focus on the question of whether we have chosen to rely on "imperial bread," or the "alternative bread" provided by a loving God. And have we chosen, even when we're blessed with manna from heaven, to hoard it just as the anxious Israelites did so long ago? Is such anxiety at the root of our culture's urge to excess; is it a fear that there won't be enough to go around so that all of God's children are fed?

Food, work, rest. While many beautiful things have been written on this down-to-earth text about the human need for food and the need to trust in God's abundance (one wonders how many problems of scarcity and lack and suffering come from hoarding), there is another profound human need that surfaces in this short story. And this need also exposes the difference between Pharaoh and the God-Who-Will-Be-What-Is-Needed. In this text we hear about sabbath, regular rest from work, something that our driven culture rarely practices. After all, we're too busy working to store up what we may need or want later. And the Pharaohs of this world have laid heavy quotas on many of us, so the workload isn't always voluntary. What do you think the world would be like if everyone took (and was able to take) one day of real rest each week? (Two would be better, of course.) What if sabbath were a spiritual practice that shaped us, day by day, into people of inner calm and trust in God? Isn't the world, the earth itself and its people, in need of rest?

Perhaps the lesson in this story about rest is not as dramatic as the image of bread from heaven, but it's closely tied to it. God tells the people not to hoard the bread but to trust that even if they take a day off, there will still be enough to eat. Contrast and compare once again the demands of Pharaoh and the expectations of Yahweh: as Gerald Janzen observes, both Pharaoh and Yahweh "scattered" the people, sending them out in search of something. For Pharaoh, it was straw so they could make their daily quota of bricks (how much more does the text need to sound like our experience, with our own daily quotas of "bricks"?). But for Yahweh, the people are scattered to look for bread, something for their own good, not for the glory of Pharaoh and his ostentatious building programs.

Yahweh and Pharaoh: There's no comparison!

Food and rest, both of them needed, were both denied by Pharaoh, who wouldn't give the slaves a day off to rest. But Yahweh did give time for rest: "For Yahweh," Janzen writes, "six days of work is enough, and on the seventh they may rest from the gathering." But the Israelites are uncomfortable with this "shift in the rhythm of their days," and they think their survival depends on their efforts (and wits) rather than God's providence. It seems that "part of what God has to heal the people of is a deeply ingrained but flawed sense of the relation between food and time." We often use the expression, "to put bread on the table," when we justify our work habits. There's a lot of talk about what it means to be Christian in our culture (especially in our highly politicized setting), but this conversation seems to focus mainly on sexuality issues rather than, for example, a faithful approach to money and possessions, which are both important topics in the Bible. But we rarely hear "sabbath" mentioned in the same sentence as "faithful" or "the Bible." In our fatigue and stress, our anxiety and anger, our greed and hostilities, are we showing signs of our own tensions in the wilderness? As a beautiful Jewish prayer says, "Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles." One might say that we "work" sightless among miracles, too. Janzen wonders whether "the question in principle for Christians is whether we have ceased to serve God as the Lord of time and have begun to serve Pharaoh instead." What does it say about human nature today when even "free" people apparently need a law to make them rest?

When leading stewardship workshops on tithing, I often ask participants if they think the church, and more importantly, the world, would be different if everyone practiced tithing, as the Bible instructs us. Everyone raises their hand. Likewise, when I ask if they think the world (not just the church, but our families, our workplaces, neighborhoods and nations) would be a different place if everyone actually observed the sabbath, every hand goes up, and each one of us admits to our great need for rest from gathering those daily quotas of straw, our human need for time to acknowledge the source of our blessings and the grace that sustains our lives. How else can we live our lives in gratitude and trust?

Source: http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/tensions-in-the-wilderness.html