

Regimens of Mystery

[Exodus 16:1-6](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

This morning we are returning to our series of worship services focused on walking with God. Today we discover that God can lead you to freedom, but only you can choose to stop being a slave.

In the fifteenth chapter of Exodus we are told that three days after the miraculous Red Sea crossing the Hebrews traveled twenty-five miles south to a place called Marah, where the water was bitter. We are told, "The people complained against Moses, saying 'What shall we drink?'" Fascinating. Three days after witnessing one of the greatest miracles in biblical history, and as soon as their canteens run dry nobody says, "I can't wait to see what God does now."

When they left Egypt, all the Hebrews had was just a vague dream of a better life. They knew little who God was, or even who they were. So as soon as the road through the desert became hard, they immediately began to feel like nothing more than desperate runaway slaves, heading south into the desert, twenty-five miles in the opposite direction from the Promised Land. All they knew was that they were ill equipped, out of resources, and terrified that they would die of thirst. Now the dreams they had when they left Egypt seem foolish.

In the face of the anxiety of the present, the miracles of yesterday are hard to remember. But it is our memory of God's faithfulness in the past that waters our dreams for the future.

What about your dreams? Didn't your dream of devoting your life to something significant? You had dreams for your children, or your job, or the future. Like everyone else, you started out toward these dreams with few resources -- a small canteen filled with love, commitment, education, and resolve. But very soon on the hard road your resources run dry. Then you start to wonder, "Who was I kidding to try and do this thing?"

This is why most ministers would prefer to do premarital counseling after the wedding. About three days of marriage is all it takes. By then the couple is about twenty-five miles south of their dreams for this marriage, running low on resources, and are now ready to talk about how God is involved in their commitment.

Twelve days ago our nation began a new journey to rid the world of terrorism. Like the Hebrews who once stood on the other side of the Red Sea banks, we crossed over and began this journey not because we wanted to, but because we had no choice. We were chased across the river by evil chariots coming for us. At this point we still have so much resolve and commitment for our dream to live without terrorists. But now that the journey has begun, be certain that it will not be long before we are worried that this journey is costing too much. The stock market is already terrified. Other sacrifices are not far behind.

How will we survive the long walk through the desert that is ahead for this nation? Not by being certain of our resources; only by being certain of the God who is with us along the way. When the church talks about having faith, we are not talking about having faith in ourselves, having faith in the nation, or even having faith in the righteousness of our cause -- as right as it seems to us. When the church talks about faith, we are talking only about having faith in the faithfulness of God whose grace is always found on the hard roads.

Well, God miraculously turned the bitter water at Marah into clean, drinkable water. After being delivered, the people moved on. To chapter 16. Six weeks later they journeyed farther into the wilderness and this time they ran out food. And again the people complained to Moses and Aaron, talking about how wonderful it was in Egypt "when we sat by the fleshpots and had our fill of bread. But you have brought us

into this wilderness to kill us with hunger" (16:3).

Notice that whenever the people find the journey difficult they always blame their leaders. That is because at this point they still cannot see it is God who has called them to this sacred journey. But he has called them not to arrive. If that is all God wanted he would have taken a shorter route through the desert. No, the reason God has called them into the wilderness is to be changed. Every journey through the wilderness comes at some cost, and the greatest cost is not our resources but the comfortable, miserable old life that we knew before the journey began.

I believe that is the reason our nation has been called into the journey we have now begun. It is not just to triumph over terrorists. God could do that without our help. The blessing of being sent out onto a hard road is that at the end of the road the nation will be different. That is part of the good that will come out of the rubble of collapsed towers. God is found not in the evil that destroyed so many lives. Don't blame that on him. Rather he is found always in the redemption of evil, in triumphing over evil by using it for good.

How many times have you heard someone say, "We will never be the same after September 11th"? That is the first reason we have for hope. For too long we have been a nation enslaved to sitting at the fleshpots and having our fill. For too long we have reduced our lives to slavishly collecting a few more resources. For too long we have lived as a people wealthy in money and poor in spirit, in purpose, meaning, and in great causes that are worthy of our lives. On September 10th we were still enslaved to the meaningless, mindless, self-indulgent activity of thinking the nation existed to benefit to us. Few of us are thinking like that anymore. On September 10th we were still enslaved to the ridiculous illusion that evil and violence could invade other nations but never ours. None of us think that anymore.

So the changes, the transformations, have already begun. But when the road gets hard up ahead, and it certainly will, the great temptation will be to become romantic about the slavery we left behind. But there is no going back. Salvation is found not in returning to yesterday, but in seeing the faithfulness of God along the way.

When the Lord heard the laments of the people, he said, I am going to rain bread from heaven for you and each day the people will go out and gather enough bread for that day" (16:4). So for the rest of the journey every morning, except the Sabbath, the people went out to collect manna, the bread from heaven. This manna was a curious thing. It was a fine, flaky substance, we are told in verse 14, as fine as the frost on the ground. For forty years it became the daily staple of the Hebrew diet. According to verse 16, everyone had to gather their own manna. You couldn't hoard it because it wouldn't last. It certainly wasn't much, just enough to keep you going on the journey.

It is a wonderful symbol for how God cares for us along the way. We may travel together on this journey, but everyone has to gather his or her own spiritual nourishment. And you have to get it daily. This is why we have been relentlessly calling you to the daily devotional life in this church. As you begin the day in prayer and reading God's word, you find the nourishment you need, but just enough for the day. No one ever stores up all they need to know about God. And no one ever gets fat on manna. We have been fat long enough. Now it is time to be free, free to accept greater purposes to life.

The best reason for seeing manna as the symbol for the faithfulness of God along the journey comes from its name. A literal translation of manna is "What is it?" Every morning Moms would gather "What is it," place it on the table, and their kids would ask, "What is it?" The Moms would say, "Well, yes."

Their daily nourishment was found in a question. "What is it, God, that you are doing?" "What is it that you are asking me to leave behind?" "What is it that you are calling me to become?" Nothing is more nourishing to your faith, to your identity, than wrestling with that question. It is the irresistible daily question of anyone in the wilderness who soon runs out of resources and resolve.

Some will say, "I thought that if I just got trained and worked hard I would be happy. But I hate this job, and its too late to start over. What is it, God, that you are telling me?"

Others will say, "We saved our whole life for retirement. But now that we can finally enjoy it, one of us has

become sick. Real sick. All the money and all the health are gone. What is it God that you are doing with us today?"

All of us will say, "We are in a war to try to rid the world of terrorists. But it's already revealing our racism which terrorizes Arab Americans, and that will have to change. And we understand better how to take our place among those in the world who suffer at the hands of evil. And we are not as quick to whine about the small problems of our own lives now that we have looked into the face of real heartache. Now having begun the journey or making changes, we don't really know where it will end. What is it, God, that you are doing with our nation?"

As we ask that question daily, taking it into our prayers and reading of God's holy Word, we turn our eyes away from yesterday and away from slavery. And we turn toward the new creation that only the Creator can shape of our lives. Your job is not to answer the question, "What is it that God is doing?" That's God's job, and he will answer it as you start to see yourself, and as the nation starts to see itself differently.

Today it is enough to bring the question to worship, and to give thanks that while we may not yet know who we are becoming we are so grateful that God has not abandoned us to the comfortable slavery we once knew.

O God, in the midst of so much confusion and chaos, we bow our heads to give thanks for your sacred mysterious presence among us. You never settle with the life for which we have settled but use even the evil of others to mold us into new creations, from one degree of glory to another, until we look like Jesus Christ in whose name we pray, and hope. Amen.