

“Manna from Heaven and Ugly Fruit”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 16:2-5, 13-18, 31

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First, there was the toilet paper shortage. I remember so clearly when I first encountered the empty toilet paper aisle. An employee began opening up one lone box to stock the shelves, and he announced loudly, “Toilet paper!” And I watched as once-seemingly-rational grown adults rushed towards this precious box of toilet paper like a horde of zombies. At first, I judged them. But then, as I realized that I also needed toilet paper and watched it quickly running out, I found myself in amongst the horde rushing to grab a bag for myself too.

Then, there was no hand sanitizer. Or baby wipes. Or paper towels. Or Lysol. I guess that’s to be expected during a pandemic as everyone is busy trying to frantically clean and sanitize everything.

But then, there were other weirder shortages:

- Yeast, because suddenly everyone was baking.
- And seeds, because suddenly everyone was gardening.
- Aluminum, because more people were at home and drinking pop to quench the boredom. (Consumption is up by more than 30%.)
- Appliances. One article I read put it frankly, saying, “Good luck finding a freezer. Freezers are on an 8- to 12-week backorder.”
- Pools and hot tubs, because beaches and community pools were closed.
- And (by far, my favorite) puzzles.

I have watched a countless number of apocalyptic movies, and never once did they warn me that I should stock up on puzzles.

Why do we do this? Why do we, as seemingly rational people, frantically stockpile and hoard away toilet paper, and yeast, and puzzles like squirrels?

Sometimes it is out of self-preservation. When food is scarce, or when water runs dry, or when money is tight and we don’t know how we are going to support ourselves or our children, we guard what we have desperately.

And sometimes our hoarding comes out of our own perceived self-preservation, even if it’s not actually needed. Toilet paper, for example; you don’t want to be the one idiot without it. Social psychologists have actually been studying COVID’s toilet paper phenomenon, and they have labeled this kind of panic-driven, pandemic-shopping as “herding.” As behavioral economist Professor Michelle Baddeley writes,

"Our propensity to follow others is complex. Some of our reasons for herding are well-reasoned...However numerous experiments from social psychology also show that we can be blindly susceptible to the influence of others. So when we see others rushing to buy toilet paper, we fear of missing out and follow the herd. It then becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy."

But sometimes – admittedly, far too often – we hoard more than we need simply out of pure selfishness.

Statistics show that the world’s richest 1 percent, those with more than \$1 million, own 44 percent of the world’s wealth. In fact, the world’s 10 richest billionaires, according to Forbes, own \$801 billion in combined wealth, a sum greater than the total goods and services most nations produce annually.

However, it's too easy to point our fingers elsewhere and not dare to look at ourselves. For humbly, statistics also tell us that those who own over \$100,000 in assets, which I would suspect would include many of us here, only make up less than 11 percent of the global population. But we own 82.8 percent of the global wealth. Meanwhile, a majority of the world's population has less than \$10,000 to their name. This 56 percent of all of the people of the world holds less than 2 percent of the global wealth.

Friends, it is shameful that 3 million children die from hunger every year – that is one child every 15 seconds – when we as Americans waste 150,000 tons of food each and every single day. There is enough food for everyone, but not everyone has enough food.

It is not just the pandemic, but a global pandemic surely doesn't help. No, even before the toilet paper, we were – and frankly, we still are – hoarders.

Unlike us, the Israelites in our passage today have nothing, absolutely nothing to their name, except for faith in God and hope in a Promised Land. Once slaves, they have been released from captivity in Egypt. Yet, it will be 40 very long years in the wilderness before they reach that land that they have been promised. They are starving, literally starving, in the desert. The situation is so dire that they wish they were back in bondage. “At least then we had food,” they complain to Moses.

Manna from heaven – so much emphasis typically gets placed on the miracle of the manna from heaven. This phrase has become the quintessential example of God's provision and grace given to us in hard times. And it is that; but it is also so much more. Personally, I find this lesser known part of the story just as miraculous –

¹⁷ Some gathered more, some less. ¹⁸ But...those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

If they can do it, if a people in a situation so desperate and dire that they would rather be slaves than starve can do it, if even they can grab only what they need and share all that they have, so can we.

A few years ago, I read this headline – “5,000 People Get Free Lunch Made From ‘Ugly’ Fruits And Vegetables.” The article explained how farmers often leave up to 40 percent of their harvests rotting in their fields just because it is “ugly,” meaning that it doesn't conform to the perfect size or shape big supermarkets demand. They said, “This even happens in countries like Kenya where millions of people are hungry.”

So in an effort to feed the hungry and to raise awareness, a nonprofit literally fed 5,000 people a free lunch using nothing but “ugly” food. That is manna from heaven.

Friends, there are so many real, tangible ways that we can help each other through these trying times. Ways in which neighbor can help neighbor, and we as a church family can support each other. With food and finances, with faith and friendship, and oh so much more. Social distancing does not mean social isolation. And while we wait for help – while we endlessly wait on governments, and health officials, and scientists, and vaccines to help us out of this terrible mess – we are not helpless. For we have God. And we have each other. And God has given each of us what we need to help each other.

Think, truly think, of all the many blessings that you have been given. How many incredible ways has God already blessed your life, right now, today? Even if to others this blessing may just look like a piece of “ugly fruit”? And then challenge yourself – how can you share some of those blessings with others? Right now, today? For there is enough food for everyone, but not everyone has enough food. Even that “ugly fruit” is a blessing that someone else may desperately need. Manna from heaven – may your blessing be a blessing to another today.