

Today we come to the table for World Communion Sunday. We think about Christians all around the world who, by the power of the Spirit, feast together at the one table. The provision we eat looks, on the surface, pretty meager: a piece of bread and a sip of juice. God's provision rarely looks like we expect. When the people saw the manna they didn't say, "yay, bread to eat!" They peered at it and said, "what is it?" But with the Spirit's help, we can begin to actually see the signs of hope that God has sent. We can see that the communion meal means so much more because it is a sign of unity across difference and distance. It is a symbol of Christ's enduring presence with us. By the power of the Spirit, we begin to realize that God's provision is actually far more than it first appears; it is incredibly abundant. Which means that the times we live in may not be changing, at least not yet. But we will not be spiritually starving while we live through them. God's abundance is real. What God gives us is, as one scholar says, a wonder, a miracle, an embarrassment of riches; it's even irrational. Most importantly, what God gives is enough to get us through.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

October 5, 2025
17th Sunday after Pentecost
"When We Hunger"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Exodus 16:1-18

I remind my kids all the time that there are people in our own community, probably even people here among us today, who don't have enough to eat at home. Hunger is real. I've struggled these past months to really look at photos of people in Gaza who are growing more and more gaunt, as adequate food aid is prevented from reaching them. For a lot of us, though, we are very unfamiliar with a feeling of true, physical hunger. I pray that the blessing of not-knowing-hunger would be distributed more equitably and evenly across our society. I am praying for solutions so people are fed and for the will to actually make it happen

Though many of us are unaccustomed to a hunger for bread, we do still know deep, gut-level yearning. Many of us are yearning for a good word, a hopeful truth, a promise for the world to be made new. We feel this longing for personal situations that are pressing in on us, and especially for the wider world. Because we watch the news with dread. We see a church burn and reel from violence in our own state. We see our governments shutting down, or barely running, because we are so divided we cannot agree to fund the basic functions of government, or even what the purpose of government is anymore. Weekly, people ask me, "Where can I turn? What can I look to for hope?" I don't hear them complaining. I hear them yearning for something to nourish their spirits more than funny memes and reels, false optimism, and the cynicism that quickly festers. We are hungering for a better truth, a different reality.

The Israelites were hungry in both those senses. They did not have enough to eat as they traveled through a dry and desolate wilderness and their hearts were longing for sustenance. The journey seemed to be leading nowhere. They were so desperate as to start yearning not for freedom, anymore, but for their former life as slaves. "Even Egypt would be better than this. Let's go back to the way it used to be; from here, even that life looks great."

- 1 Amy G. Oden, "Commentary on Exodus 16:1-18," October 5, 2025, *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-provides-manna/commentary-on-exodus-161-18-4>
- 2 Tom Long, "Counterculture in the Pulpit," *Presbyterian Outlook*, September 23, 2025.
- 3 Long, "Counterculture in the Pulpit."
- 4 Long, "Counterculture in the Pulpit."
- 5 Kevin Chang Barnum, "People who build bookcases for prisons have their own story to tell," September 24, 2025, *Connecticut Public Radio*, <https://www.ctpublic.org/news/2025-09-24/prison-books-reading-libraries-education-bookcases-freedom-reads-ct>

God heard their hungering. God did not scold them; God responded with an abundance of food, both bread and meat. God intended that they follow the instructions about *how* to enjoy it, but otherwise, it was a free gift. The response fulfilled their hunger. And it was God's hope that this abundance would nourish their bodies and speak to their spirits.

Three other things were true about *how* God nourished the Israelites in the face of their deepest hunger.¹ First, God gave them enough to eat without changing the situation around them. God did not make fields of wheat spring up or the landscape lush with fruit. God simply supplied their basic need each day, even as their hardship did not end. Second, the provision was enough, yet it was limited. Everyone had what they needed, no matter how much they gathered. But they could not store up the manna for a rainy day or to save themselves the trouble of gathering it tomorrow. Trusting in God's provision was necessary. Finally, while they were still hungering, the glory of God appeared to them. Up to this point, God had not appeared to the group itself. The people had been relying on the words of Aaron and Moses to understand what God was up to. Then, in the middle of their yearning for something more, the majesty of God showed up to them in a dazzling cloud. Perhaps they could only receive that gift from their position of need. Perhaps, it is when things are amiss in our world that we are finally able to discern the wonder of God most clearly.

As we hunger for a good word here together in our time, it may just feel like we are living in "the worst of times, in the hardest, most Gospel-resistant age imaginable."² We might wish to be living in a different, earlier time period, when the world seemed to be making progress, moving forward, getting along well. But like the illusion that being enslaved in Egypt was better than freedom in the wilderness, we fool ourselves if we assume that any period of progress ever fully embodies the Kingdom of God. Preacher Tom Long daringly suggests that perhaps we are actually living as disciples in the best of times, right now. Not because things are fine and dandy; they obviously aren't. But because there is the opportunity to proclaim so clearly with our mouths and with our lives "a word from God, a death-defying, life-giving truth announced to a world that everyone can see is choking on lies."³ The good news of God appears in stark, bright contrast to the shadows and violence all around us. The story of abundant manna in the wilderness is powerful because it is radically counter to the prevailing wisdom of scarcity and fear. God's story of love poured out for all rings true compared to the scraps that are often thrown to those in need. Long urges us to "realize how hungry people are to hear the real Gospel in all its brave wildness."⁴ We know that's true because we are hungry for it too.

Our calling is to train our eyes to see that God is providing. And at the same time, to realize that we are often the ones who can embody God's good news. We can be that life-giving truth of goodness for others not by doing anything amazing, but by following Jesus' call to love our neighbors with abandon, even when there is a cost. God works through us to be the provision that sustains others who are also deeply hungry for a hopeful word. And when we can believe that good news about ourselves, we might find some encouragement there, too.

God might work through you or me to offer that provision. Or even through the people and the places we would least expect. In Connecticut, a non-profit called Freedom Reads provides sustenance and good news for inmates in prisons.⁵ Founded by a former inmate, Freedom Reads builds handmade, wooden bookshelves from maple, oak, walnut, and cherry. They cut the wood, sand and finish it; and then deliver the bookcases to prisons. In those locked down spaces, these bookcases are often the only furniture in the entire building not state issued or made from metal or concrete. When books are unboxed to fill the shelves, the volumes are brand new with crisp pages and unbroken spines. The Freedom Reads mission is about connecting inmates with the outside world through books, populating their imaginations with what might be possible. As former inmates themselves, the founder and employees know that most people in prison deeply hunger most for dignity; for hope. And so, "Freedom Reads is also about showing incarcerated people that they are seen." The organization hears people's longing and seeks to meet one small part of their need.

We should not look for fluffy white stuff on the ground, but we can look for signs of God's daily provision that will satisfy our hunger for hope. Because God has placed those gifts right here around us. That good news is here in the scriptures for us every time we go looking. It is in this community where, because Christ is at work, the generosity of people who share and care and give of themselves will absolutely blow you away. This provision of hopeful sustenance from God is not so effusive that we can save it up for all time; God keeps on renewing it and we have to do our part, too. So we are invited to seek it out daily, in prayer or meditation or concerted effort to see the goodness God is doing around us. We have to make sure we gather enough of that provision so that we can embody it for others, too, through our acts of compassion and generosity. But we can trust that God's sustenance of hope and good news for us is not running out, not now, not ever. God hears our yearning and our need. God is not giving us bread crumbs. God is raining that sustenance down from heaven to answer our complaining and our yearning.