

**August 23 2020 – Diving Hawks****Scripture Readings****Exodus 16:1-3,11-13**

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, <sup>3</sup> and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

<sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, <sup>12</sup> “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

<sup>13</sup> In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp.

**Psalm 105:37-44**

Then [God] brought out Israel with silver and gold,  
and there was none among his tribes who stumbled.

<sup>38</sup> Egypt was glad when they departed,  
for dread of them had fallen upon it.

<sup>39</sup> He spread a cloud for a covering,  
and fire to give light by night.

<sup>40</sup> They asked, and he brought quail,  
and gave them bread from heaven in abundance.

<sup>41</sup> He opened the rock, and water gushed out;  
it flowed through the desert like a river.

<sup>42</sup> For he remembered his holy promise,  
and Abraham, his servant.

<sup>43</sup> So he brought his people out with joy,  
his chosen ones with singing.

<sup>44</sup> And he gave them the lands of the nations,  
and they took possession of the fruit of the peoples' toil,

<sup>45</sup> that they might keep his statutes  
and observe his laws.

Praise the Lord!

### **Matthew 23:37-39**

[Jesus said:] "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

### **Message: "Diving Hawks"**

There is nothing like someone complaining  
to make a hard job harder  
or a bad day worse.  
For those cheerful or at least stoic workers in the group,  
all those complaints are just an extra burden to carry,  
something more to put up with,  
alongside the work or the hardship.  
Grumbling can also be contagious, too,  
moving from person to person  
until the whole group is muttering and moaning.  
I wonder if that's what happened in the wilderness of Sin  
among the people of God.

In fairness, they are in a hard and uncertain situation.  
By this point, the Israelites have already been chased  
to the shores of the Red Sea by the entire Egyptian army,  
and are now travelling  
through an unmarked and unfamiliar

wilderness landscape.

They are far away from the familiar, well-established and rich civilization of Egypt;  
from the lush green of Egypt's fields and oases,  
from the reliable waters of the Nile.  
The people of God are living rough,  
out among the spiders and snakes  
and fierce desert foxes,  
surrounded by rocks and sand  
and scrubby trees and coarse plants,  
searching for food and water enough  
for thousands of people,  
in an endless wilderness.

After a month and a half of this,  
slavery in Egypt is starting to look a little better than it used to.  
Human memories are short,  
and we often self-edit, remembering the good bits  
and forgetting the bad.  
Maybe they're remembering that, once upon a time,  
they were starving refugees, and Egypt is where they went  
for a full belly and a new start.  
Joseph, of technicolor dream coat fame,  
had been a slave himself there,  
but became so valued and trusted  
that eventually all his brothers, all Israel,  
were welcomed in  
and made part of Egyptian society.  
Generations later, a new pharaoh,  
unhappy about the sheer number of foreign Israelites  
present in his kingdom, made them slaves.  
But...even as slaves, they were fed and sheltered  
and had ample water to drink;  
comfortable slavery  
was better than starving in freedom,  
or so their hunger-clouded  
minds concluded.

And so they grumbled and complained and said to Moses and Aaron,  
"Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,

when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full,  
for you have brought us out into this wilderness  
to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

And God provided them  
with meat and bread both,  
right there in the wilderness.

You might be thinking that the next thing I’m going to say  
is that God cares for us, and God provides.

But I’m not.

Not because it isn’t true and important,  
because it is,  
but because we are today  
going to look at the askers and the receivers  
of that care and provision;  
we’re going to look at ourselves,  
God’s people,  
in the wilderness then  
and in the world right now.

Think back to a time when you’ve asked God  
for what you needed or wanted or hoped for in the past;  
most likely, we remember ourselves asking nicely.

But Israel!

They don’t even really ask for God’s care  
in this upswell of complaining.

Poor Moses turns to God...

...and he passes God’s message  
on to them:

I’ve heard your complaining,  
and I will provide.

Normally we focus on the manna at this point,  
the dew that solidifies into bread.

But the quail are kind of amazing, too.

This incident is elaborated upon in the book of Numbers.

There, we are told that God brought up a whole flock of quail from the sea,  
enough that they covered the whole landscape  
a day’s travel in every direction,  
flocking just below head-height for easy capture  
by his hungry people.

That's a lot of birds.

Unlike most birds of the pheasant family,  
the common quail is actually a migrating bird,  
flying in massive flocks on strong wings  
from sub-Saharan Africa to northern Europe,  
year after year.

And that makes this miracle of the quail  
a really serious demonstration  
of God's love for us  
and his command over creation,  
that he can  
– that he would –  
alter the normal path of migration  
of a whole species,  
just for his beloved, grumbly people.

Of course, if you turn the pages in the book of Exodus,  
the people of Israel backslide and repent  
and do the wrong thing and then turn back to God,  
again and again.

But eventually, a second generation,  
born in the wilderness,  
make it to the green fields and milk and honey  
of the Promised Land.

Years later, the Exodus story is  
part of the backbone of Israel's certainty  
that God is always faithful,  
and that he always keeps his promises to them.

What we read from Psalm 105 is one of many songs and poems  
celebrating this part of their history as God's people:  
"They asked, and he brought quail,  
and gave them bread from heaven in abundance...  
...he brought his people out with joy,  
his chosen ones with singing."

Moses might have something to say  
 about the people just “asking”  
 and then dancing and singing their way  
 through forty years in the desert.  
 Moses, no doubt, would have called it  
 “complaining” and “dragging their heels”  
 and maybe even “wandering in circles.”

But they did make it out;  
 God did provide...even if, in their remembering of the whole experience,  
 God’s people put a bit of shine on their own behaviour,  
 brushing aside the complaining, the backsliding  
 and the arguing.

How do **we** ask God for what we need or want or hope to have?  
 We may have a pretty shiny image in mind of ourselves,  
 approaching God and making a polite request,  
 patiently waiting for God’s care and provision,  
 and then humbly thanking him afterwards.

But I wonder how often our “asks” are more of the  
 foot-stamping grumbly, complaining variety?  
 More like a teen railing against curfew  
 or a little kid demanding chocolate cake for their dinner  
 instead of eating their Brussel sprouts?

Well, why can’t I have what I’m asking for, God?  
 You should let us have it, or else.  
 If you really loved us, God,  
 you’d do what we want you to,  
 you’d give us what we ask for.

But in the same way that chocolate cake  
 three meals a day won’t result in tall, healthy, happy child,  
 God acts for our spiritual growth and well-being,  
 so that we will find our life in him  
 and have that life, abundantly.

But we, like those hungry, scared Israelites in the wilderness,  
 often don’t understand why and why not.  
 And so we push away the care that God gives,  
 the provision we need,  
 for what we think is best.

Those few verses we read from the gospel of Matthew  
 – O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets  
 and stones those who are sent to it!, and so on –  
 those words that Jesus spoke fall at the end  
 of a long, frustrated, heart-breaking speech  
 made to the religious insiders  
 and leaders of the day.  
 Jesus expounds on seven “woes”  
 expressing all the ways that God’s people were getting it wrong,  
 rejecting God and worse,  
 hurting others.  
 Jesus does not pull any punches;  
 this close to the end, to his death on the Cross,  
 he doesn’t have the time  
 and his frustrated grief is apparent  
 through the whole speech.

But instead of rage and destruction  
 or promises of doom and despair  
 towards his people who are messing it up badly,  
 we get this beautiful, maternal image.

Jesus compares himself, in one of the tenderest passages of Scripture,  
 to a mother hen in a poultry yard.  
 A brood of freshly-hatched fluffy yellow chicks  
 scampers around an open space,  
 peeping loudly while their ever-watchful mother  
 clucks at them.

In our imaginations, we can see,  
 as if out of nowhere, a hawk diving,  
 wings folded, keen eyes gleaming, talons open,  
 ready to grab a chick.  
 But the hen’s eye is also sharp,  
 and she quickly collects her chicks  
 and hides them under her wings.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...,” laments Jesus,  
 “how often I have longed to gather your children together,  
 as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,  
 but you were not willing.”

And that is a very important truth,  
and the crux of the problem.  
We tend to focus on God caring, on God providing,  
and He does and always will.  
But our response to that caring, to God...  
...we are not willing.  
We reject it, reject him,  
or ignore God until we want something,  
or we complain,  
or we just wander off.  
Like a fluffy little chick distracted  
by an especially juicy-looking grasshopper  
or an extra-delicious looking leaf...  
...we end up far away from God.

And when the diving hawks of pain and grief,  
of fear and need, of pride and self-importance,  
of anger and greed...  
...when those diving hawks of sin and suffering  
swoop down upon us,  
we are so unaccustomed to being cared for  
by God,  
that we struggle to trust it,  
to accept his care and take shelter under his protective wings.

No wonder Jesus wept.

But we can rejoice.  
God gathered Israel under his wings,  
delivering them from bondage,  
giving them quail to eat in the wilderness  
and providing for their every need.  
There is a hand in the darkness,  
a God who knows us and calls us by name,  
a God who will never let us go...  
...but also never keeps us  
against our  
own choosing.  
Even though Jesus' wings were clipped and bruised  
and crucified  
for all the brokenness and sin in creation,  
he lives and so do we,  
so will we.



God cares for us, provides for us,  
and protects us;  
the offer of that care and provision  
is always there for us to accept,  
his wings always outstretched  
toward us.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.