

One problem we have as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans reading the Hebrew Scriptures is that we are very linear people. We like things to be in order. A happens. Then B. Then C. And then we read our Bibles. Genesis, then Exodus, then Leviticus, and now Numbers. And we think we're reading a linear story. Genesis first. Then Exodus. Then Leviticus. etc. And to some degree it works. But these stories weren't meant to be read only in a chronological fashion. If you have noticed, some of these stories sound familiar. "Haven't we already read about this?"

So, rather than seeing these texts in a line, try to think of them in a spiral. The story keeps circling around on itself, looking at the story from different angles, bringing different perspectives on the events.

And so, today, we have another perspective on how the people handled the diet of manna in the wilderness. This section of Numbers gives a different account of the story told in Exodus 16 and 17, from which it is normally preached. I invite you, this week, to compare the two. Why do you think they interpreted the story so differently? And why, do you suppose, the people who put together the lectionary chose the manna story from Exodus instead of this one from Numbers?

In any case, we find the people complaining in the wilderness. Haven't we seen this before?

Yes.

And this time, the anger of the Lord is kindled against their complaints. I often tell people, and other places in scripture suggest, that it is okay to complain to God. Even in this passage, Moses complains to God about the people complaining to him! But Moses doesn't get burned up in fire.

But the Israelites had already prayed for deliverance from Egypt, and God had heard their cries and freed them from slavery. God was continuing to provide for them, traveling with them and providing them with manna wherever they went.

They have, in some senses, already had their prayers answered. They now longer have to work for Pharaoh. They have their lives back and they are heading to the promised land, although admittedly on a somewhat indirect path.

And then they whine to God. About how great it was in slavery. About how good the food was in Egypt. About how much they MISS it and wish they were back there. Personally, even though I'm uncomfortable with God who sets camp on FIRE and consumes God's own people, I admire this God. I admire it when God says, "**what do you people want from me????!** I saved your lives. I freed you from Pharaoh, which took some planning, by the way, and now you want to go **back?**"

How often are we like this? We pray with great conviction about what we want God to do for us, but then, sometimes we don't know what to do when our prayers are answered. We can be fickle. We may pray for the church to grow, which is a good thing. But then will we complain when there is no place to park? Or when new people are sitting in the pews that have been in your family for 123 years?

The people complain about the food—“if only we had meat to eat!”—and God says, “you don’t like the manna? You think you want meat to eat? I can do that. I’ll send you meat until it is coming out of your noses!”

This version of the story is much more gruesome than Exodus’ version, but does a much better job of illustrating the adage, “be careful what you wish for”. There are quails in Exodus too, but the people aren’t **buried** in 3 feet of quails and they don’t all die from eating them.

This is one of those stories where God’s restraint seems to wear thin.

Perhaps this is one of those times when the Israelites thought, “maybe we didn’t really want you to answer that prayer, God.”

Because, in the words of the great theologian—and I know you’ve been waiting for this ever since I started talking about unanswered prayers—in the words of the great theologian Garth Brooks-- “some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers”.

I asked some people this week about unanswered prayers. It seemed that most people had some experience with them. One of my friends from high school suffered three miscarriages. And with each pregnancy, she prayed to become a mother and carry those pregnancies to term. But she and her husband adopted children. And she said she is thankful that God answered the part of the prayer about becoming a mother. She also said she was thankful that she didn’t carry those pregnancies to term because she knows she now has the children God intended her to mother.

A number of friends told me about relationships they were in—engagements and marriages that didn’t work out. And they all prayed for the relationships to work, to improve. As difficult as it was for them to end those relationships—even relationships that had been blessed by God in a church wedding—they were now thankful that their prayers were not answered as they thought they should be.

A friend of mine from Albuquerque was hospitalized with pneumonia this past year, which was not what he’d been praying for. But his hospitalization allowed the doctors to discover another medical problem that would have likely gone undiagnosed.

And a number of people told me stories about the deaths of loved ones. So many of them had been praying for their loved ones, who were terminal and in great pain, to have an end to their suffering. But they were all thankful that God didn’t immediately answer those prayers because the time they had, even in the midst of the pain, allowed them to say things that needed to be said. Allowed them to heal and restore relationships.

For all of those illustrations, I’m sure each of you have your own memories of unanswered prayers for which you are thankful. And I’m sure more than a few of you have memories of prayers that you still wish God had answered for you.

That’s the tricky thing.

When we pray, we can't see the whole picture. We just have the view of our lives right this minute. And most days I'm thankful for that. I'm glad to live each day as it occurs. Most days I'm glad I don't know what's going to happen five days or five years from now. Perhaps you have seen the movie "Bruce Almighty". Jim Carrey plays a self absorbed TV newsman who is dating Jennifer Anniston's character, Grace. She is way too good for him. She gives blood, teaches pre-school, and generally tries to help people. He, on the other hand, thinks only of himself and complains that his life is unfair and that God could fix it all in 5 minutes if God were paying attention.

God, as played by Morgan Freeman tells Bruce that he can be God for a while. And so a few hours of movie hilarity ensues. In addition to the sports car that every man would drive, were they God, Bruce decides to answer every person's prayers with "yes" to make them all happy.

One woman loses 47 pounds on the Krispy Kreme diet. Someone's stock portfolio triples in 3 days. 400,000 people win the New York Lottery, which means that each person wins \$17. But by the end of the movie, Bruce, who can't see the big picture, has made a mess of things as God.

I invite you to watch this film. At the end, God and Bruce have a conversation about prayer. God tells Bruce to pray. And Bruce asks God for world peace. God tells him that is a fine prayer if you want to be Miss America. "But what do you really want?"

And Bruce prays for Grace. That she will be loved by someone who sees her through God's eyes.

By the end of the film, as only seems to happen in Hollywood, everything comes together for Bruce.

But just because we don't have access to the big picture doesn't mean we shouldn't still voice our dreams and wishes to God. It just means we need some awareness of our limited vision as we're praying. So, rather than complaining to God, as Bruce Almighty and the Israelites did-- "Give us meat to eat!", perhaps the outcome would have been different had they started with gratitude. "Thank you God for the deliverance we've already experienced. For freedom from slavery. For life. For your guiding presence in the wilderness." Perhaps you have heard of the ACTS understanding of prayer.

**Adoration**—acknowledging that we worship a gracious and merciful God

**Confession**—acknowledging that we come before God as broken people in a broken world

**Thanksgiving**—thanking God for the gifts we've already received thus far on the journey

**Supplication**—asking God to hear the concerns, burdens, and worries that are weighing us down.

In our text today, the first three components were missing.

I don't know what you are wanting to voice to God, but I encourage you to keep at it, even if we may someday be thanking God for another unanswered prayer.