

What is it?

Exodus 16:2-15

Introduction: Did you notice all the grumbling going on in the wilderness as well as the parable of the workers in the vineyard? I began pondering these lessons while overhearing a woman complaining to her husband at the table next to mine. She was complaining about his lack of response to a household fix-it job. Let me take you directly to the grumbling people in the wilderness. God's people who were enslaved in Egypt and they were delivered in the great story of the Exodus. Through the plagues, through the waters of the sea, they had given Pharaoh's chariots the slip, and they are at last free. God delivered his people in a dramatic way. In the Exodus passage today we find them a short time after liberation, slavery is over, the drama is over. They are in the wilderness in desolate wasteland with no food to eat.

This is when the grumbling starts. "Have you brought us out here and delivered us from slavery so that we might simply starve to death like dogs here in the wilderness? As it turns out they are not alone in the wilderness. When they come out of their tents the next morning there is this white dew-like substance scattered all over the ground. It is sticky, gummy, and sticks to their feet. It is gooey and rather disgusting. At the end of the story for today it says:

¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Image: In Hebrew the word is Manhu. What is it? Manna? What is it? This is our image and theme for today. Those who were really hungry tasted this gooey substance and their expression turned from "What is it?" to a more lively response "This tastes good!" God provided Bread from Heaven and moved them once again from "what is it?" to "whose are you?" God comes.

This story is just another reminder that when we are in our wilderness ***God hears us, God answers us, and God comes to us.*** But not always the way we think...there is numerous times in which we have asked "what is it?" and turned around to find a relationship that gives life.

Immediacy: Last Sunday was grandparent's day, on Saturday in the Milwaukee Journal (Journal Interactive September 10, 2011) there was an article titled "Sitting on lap lends to stand-in grandparents."

Kathy and Dean Thome were in a restaurant on Father's Day in 2006 celebrating the day with their daughter. When this beautiful little child toddled over to her with her arms up. She wanted to sit on her lap. She looked over at her dad he said, "Go ahead, sure." The parents were sitting a few tables away. Seeing this, the child's older sister ran over too, and climbed into Dean's lap. Now Dean was known most of us who grew up in Grafton Wisconsin as *Senor Thome* our Spanish teacher now retired. This is how Peggy got the story...

For 20 minutes the girls sat with the Thome's chatting and helping themselves to their food. It was out of the blue – or was it?

You need to know something about the timing of this encounter. The Thome's had learned days earlier that their daughter would not be able to have children; and their son and his wife decided not to have kids. Kathy and Dean needed to make peace with never being grandparents.

"I still believe in miracles. It was two little girls," Senor Thome said. That would be Cloe and Grace O'Connell, daughters of Greg and Leslie O'Connell. At the time Cloe was four years old and Grace who started this all in motion was twenty-one months old and she is now seven.

Here's another important piece of the story, Greg's and Leslie's parents have all died the last one dying when Cloe was just 3 months old. So the girls were left without grandparents. Or maybe not...

As they were finishing that brunch 5 years ago. Kathy and Dean walked the girls back to their parents and they all talked and exchanged phone numbers. Right from the start there seemed to be possibilities in the random meeting of strangers. Perhaps they could satisfy a need.

Kathy and Dean left the restaurant intrigued and excited about the encounter. But when she got home she thought "this is ridiculous." You don't get grandchildren at a restaurant! So Kathy threw the number away. And said, "Well Lord if you want me to have grandkids, you're going to have to take care of it."

Several weeks went by, Leslie and Greg talked about the Thome's and they even checked them out as best they could on Google. Finally Leslie called Kathy and asked her to lunch. They talked mom-to-mom for a long time and learned they had similar interests and values and even knew some people in common. Then Kathy invited the whole O'Connell family for brunch. That Sunday came and Senor Thome was nervous that the little girls would not have any idea who they were and forgotten the last encounter. But when they saw us at the door and got out of the car they came running as if they had known grandpa and grandma their whole lives. Kathy had mentioned to Leslie she would bake a pie. "Those little girls came

flying in screaming, ‘Grandma is making us an apple pie!’ From that day on they were Grandpa Dean and Grandma Kathy and they in turn feel so natural calling them their granddaughters. They spend holidays together and the girls take them to school on grandparent’s day, they write greeting cards with messages like: “You are the greatest grandparents I could ever have!” “I love you!” What is real is the bond they share with grandpa and grandma who thought no one would ever call them that!

Indwelling: Like the people in the Exodus story each of these families were grieving losses and God heard their pain, God answered them through two little girls, and God came to them in the bond that made them family. Oh, it was not the way they thought and maybe even asked in that restaurant years ago “What is this?” Somewhere along the line they were reminded “whose they were” and God provided. This Exodus story is repeated in the lives of God’s people. Whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness, feeling alone or bereft, this is a story that gives us hope! And often the move that we must make in times of difficulty is the move from asking, “what is it?” to exclaiming, “It is a sign that God is with us!” I watched this occur so many times. Once with a set of parents whose son told them he was gay and how in the midst of their broken dreams about their preconceived desires for his future they were introduced to his companion who brought a new set of relationships into their family. Or my friend John Robert McFarland who through the pain of hearing “the tumor is malignant” wrote a book called “Now that I have Cancer I am Whole” journaling his treatment; which has been my gift to many people in our congregation. People like Adam Raymond who hears a bit of hope through the gifts of John Robert. Sometimes God hears and answers our prayers a bit differently than we imagined; but each time God comes to us we are made whole.

Pastor Rick Lund in his teaching at Via de Cristo last weekend told his story about how God met him and led him to the joys of ministry through mini-crisis moments. As he looks back on his journey he can see at various crossroads God’s hand and presence. What appeared as a crisis ended up to be an opportunity that brought joy and fulfillment.

Invitation: How about you? Has there been a time when you asked: “What is this?” and the gift was a reminder of God’s presence. Something that began so differently but brought you a new relationship? If you have something I am giving you an opportunity to share it now...

(Congregational Responses)

In the end: Jesus is our best example of God listening to the cries of his people, God answering by sending us his Son wrapped in the flesh, but no one would have ever imagined that God’s story would include dying on a cross and rising from the dead. The bottom line is ***God hears us, God answers us, and God comes to us moving us from “what is it?” to “You are mine!”*** Amen.

