

Provisional Grace
By Rev. Ridgley Beckett
Exodus 16:2-16

Two weeks ago, I snuck away for a much-needed vacation the week before Labor Day. As many of you know, a vacation for me is one where there is very little service and a lot of time in a forest and under the stars. Recharging in the wilderness is the very thing that re-energizes me. My mind does not get quiet exactly, but it does get quieter. The stimulation of car horns, highway sounds, sirens, and people chattering becomes the stimulation of birdsong, cicadas, cricket chirps, and rushing water.

This year's adventure took me to the Pacific Northwest. My partner Andrew and I flew out to Seattle, rented a minivan retrofitted with a bed, a propane stove, a fridge, and solar panels. We named her I Oh Silver — our trusty steed for the week. We spent most of the week camping on the Olympic Peninsula, exploring Olympic National Park — remote, vast, and humbling. Mountains. Fog lifting off pristine glacier lakes. Coastal rock formations revealing marine life I had never known existed. I learned out there that there are, in fact, many shades of gray, and many shades of green.

One of the most remarkable parts of the trip was the time we spent in the Hoh Rain Forest.

I had never seen ferns grow so tall. The night we arrived, we walked the Hall of Mosses — a trail through old growth forest, maple trees draped in thick club moss, everything green, dripping, and ancient. The Hoh receives up to fourteen feet of rain per year. These ecosystems require a specific, narrow combination of climatic and geographical conditions that occur less than one percent of the Earth's surface — even more rare than tropical rainforests, and far more threatened.

But what struck me most about the Hoh was not what was living. It was what had fallen.

The forest floor was covered in enormous, downed trees — a massive spruce and hemlock that had stood two hundred and fifty, three hundred feet tall, up to sixty feet in diameter. Centuries are old. And now lying on the ground, wrapped in lichen and moss, slowly decomposing. My first instinct was to think this was a bad thing--these great ancient trees collapsed and rotting, but there were informational signs throughout the Hall of Mosses explaining what was happening.

One of the criteria that qualifies a temperate rainforest is enough dead wood on the ground. These fallen trees are called nurse logs, and they are not a sign of a forest decline. They are among the most important parts of a living rainforest. A single nurse log can provide thousands of new volunteers — seedlings that would have no would not been able to survive otherwise on the already dense forest floor. The rotting wood acts like a sponge, soaking up rainwater during dry spells. The fungi and bacteria breaking the log down create a rich, nutrient-dense foundation for everything growing around it.

Here I was in the middle of the temperate rainforest surrounded by all this beauty but also all this death. These fallen trees had taken on a new role, a new identity in the forest,

providing life and life abundant for everything around it. Where I had thought these ancient trees, stories had ended, they began in a new way. There in the wilderness, God was teaching me something. Where we see a dead end, God always provides a way forward.

I suspect that's what the Israelites felt like when they were subjected to the evils of enslavement by Pharaoh, or when they were fleeing and got to the Red Sea, only to find that by the grace of God, and Moses' staff, they were spared and released into the wilderness. Still the people they were before, but living into a new identity in a completely new place, learning slowly to trust God along the way.

Our passage this morning picks up in Chapter 16 in the book of Exodus, soon after the parting of the Red Sea. We learn that about a month in; they run out of provisions quick. Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites wandered in the desert for 3 days with no water. God provided wood for Moses to put into the water to make it drinkable for them. They camped at Elim and then made their way into the desert of Sin between Elim and Sinai. The very first sentence of our reading tells us exactly where things stand: the Israelites are grumbling.

God has shown up for them repeatedly, but they are hungry. Hungry for God to show up. They start to look back on their previous life and remember it with rose colored glasses-- "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve to death." Even though they were a free people, the comfort and predictability of their time in Egypt was familiar to them. We know that their nostalgia isn't true, but what it reveals is that they are scared, disoriented, and are doubting whether they can trust that God will provide.

But where we think there is death, God provides a way forward. God hears their grumbling and tells Moses that he will rain down bread from heaven, their daily bread—enough for all, enough for each day.

God provides. That evening, quail covered the camp and when the morning dew rose, thin flakes of manna were on the desert floor-their daily bread. The people looked at it and said "man hu?" meaning "What is this?"

At first, they did not even notice God's grace when it is right there in front of them. Manna's translation is man hu meaning "what is it?" What they were used to was bread from the earth, not bread from heaven. So, even when God gave them what they needed, they couldn't even see it. They needed Moses to tell them what it was, to open their eyes to God's mercy that is new and abundant every morning.

This is what the Lord has given you to eat.

What they had been longing for was bread from Egypt. Something familiar, something that they knew sustenance looked like. But God's manna was something that arrived daily, did not depend on their productivity, and was enough for the day, not to be hoarded. Those who tried to save it found it rotted with maggots. Those who went out to gather on the Sabbath found the ground bare, because God had already provided double the day before.

They were learning, one morning at a time, that they were no longer Pharaoh's people. They were God's people. And God's people are provided for differently — not through their own striving, not through anxious hoarding, but through daily trust in the one who gives bread from heaven.

So much of the story of Exodus is the push and pull relationship between God and the Israelites. They are learning a new way of being God's people and shedding their old identity away and as we see from their grumbling, this is hard work. I am so struck by this story because on the outside we see that God is providing them their daily bread, and they struggle to trust that God will provide a way forward. They want to depend on themselves, they are blind to God's mercy all around them, again and again. It is Moses who reminds them time and time again, the Glory of the Lord, the God who delivered you from Egypt, who quenched your thirst in the desert, will guide and provide, enough for all.

This passage is far less about the grumbling Israelites and far more about their struggle to trust in God's provision—but that isn't just the Israelites, is it?

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, it is so hard to see what is right in front of us. We can become so hyper focused on *how WE* want God to show up that we miss the things that show us God already is. We ask where God has gone when the reality is that God never left our side. One of my seminary professors used to say that it is in the wilderness that we are closer to God than anywhere else — that we are surrounded by an abundance of God's provision precisely when we feel most alone in a land scarce of grace. Sometimes we cannot see it until someone in our midst points us to it, like Moses.

Attuning ourselves to see God's mercy in our lives is not a solo project. We need one another to recognize what God is doing, especially in the wilderness seasons when the provision does not look the way we expected it to look.

This is exactly why the life of this congregation — this gathered community — matters so much. Just as those nurse logs feed the forest floor in ways that take years to become visible, our shared life here is feeding one another in ways we may not see yet. Every conversation, every prayer, every offering of time is part of that nourishment.

Which is why this morning — the beginning of a new fall program year — matters more than we might initially think.

The fall can feel like a whirlwind of expectations, to-do lists, commitments, and activities arriving all at once. And it would be easy to look at everything we have planned — the studies, the service, the meals together, the programs for our children and youth — and see it as one more thing competing for your already-stretched time. One more obligation in an overfull calendar.

But I want to suggest to you that this is where the manna is.

The things we do here at St. John's are not extracurriculars. They are not the nice-to-have items we will get to if we have bandwidth. They are the places where God feeds us — through one another, through honest wrestling with scripture, through the act of breaking

bread together, through the slow work of learning to see God's presence in the people sitting beside us.

So come to the meals. Come to the classes and book groups. Come to the service projects. Approach this program year as a chance to ask, "*What is this?*" Because the provision of God is lying on the ground all around you, and it may not look like anything you have tasted before. God is already providing—thorough this community, through these ordinary rhythms of gathered life, through one another.

In whatever wilderness you find yourself this morning — know that you do not go alone. And where you see an ending, God is already providing a way forward. Come, let us taste and see that God's manna is good!