Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’” In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When 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.”

How wonderful it is to hear this ancient and formative story from the Book of Exodus on this weekend that our Jewish brothers and sisters are holding their High Holy Day services and celebrating their New Year. We very much miss the synagogue being with us for in-person worship this year. They miss us, too, and are so very grateful for our hospitality and friendship.

Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of new beginnings. It’s a time of renewal, a time to focus on spiritual truth. It’s a new year in which each faithful believer can turn toward God, a time for deep introspection about what’s going on in the world and in one’s life. As one rabbi said: “It’s never too late to become a better version of yourself.”

A scripture passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, read on the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah, sets this tone in stark terms: “Therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God.”

Choose life! Live! Turn towards God. Is this not also a word from the living God for us this morning as we gather for worship?

Actually, it was also the living word addressed between the lines in the passage from Exodus that Ron read for us earlier. You know, when you look back, and re-read the ancient stories, it seems that God has to keep reminding us, again and again, of the gift of life that God alone provides, and of the gift of new beginnings, and in this, the gift of hope.

So, what’s going on in this story? When we pick up with the Israelites in this morning’s passage, we find them in the wilderness complaining against Moses and Aaron. “We hate it here, we’re hungry, we’re thirsty. Why did you bring us out of Egypt only to be miserable here in the wilderness? We’d rather go back. We liked life the way it was before, before you got us into this depressing mess.”

To put this in perspective, we have to remember where they’d come from, what their life was like before being in the wilderness, how they got there and why. Remember? They were slaves in Egypt. They now seem to be forgetting that part as their stomachs growl with hunger and their throats are parched.

Remember how God had liberated them, set them free? Moses and Aaron leading them out of bondage into freedom…but it’s not immediately what they thought they’d find. They’re impatient, they’re hungry and thirsty, maybe they’re afraid, and they certainly don’t see an end in sight.

Rabbi Marx, who normally would be leading those High Holy Day services here in our sanctuary, told me that nothing is certain in wilderness, especially food and water. It’s a precarious existence. But maybe even worse for the Israelites, he noted, was that they felt stuck out there. They weren’t doing normal things, like building
cities and raising crops and worshipping at the temple. They were in a holding pattern whose timeline they did not know. Every day seemed the same. They were waiting...for what? For when?

Sound at all familiar? A bit like life during Coronatide? Every day can seem the same. We feel like we’re caught in a holding pattern not of our own making. We don’t know where this is going, we don’t know why we’re here, and, truth be told, we’d really rather go back to the way life was before.

No wonder one commentator has called the wilderness “a new school of the soul.” What are we to learn in this wilderness? What if, instead of grumbling and complaining, we turn towards God?

Fortunately, God must have a pretty thick skin. God seems not to be perturbed or put off by their complaining. OK, says God. “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. Manna. And each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day...tell them that, Moses, that each day they shall have meat at twilight and each morning, their fill of bread.”

Sometimes God’s goodness just stops us in our tracks, doesn’t it? It shuts our yammering mouths. God’s goodness and mercy reset our faltering hearts. When we turn towards God, God turns towards us, or actually, God reminds us that God has never turned away. “I will rain down bread from heaven for you, and you will gather it each day.”

Bread for each day. Our daily bread. This goes right to the core of our faith. “I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus will say at a later time in this long, ancient story. “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” And he will teach us to pray together, turning towards God, praying to the sacred name of God, asking “Give us this day our daily bread.”

This is one very long story across scriptures about bread, bread that gives life, bread that gives sustenance to our bodies and our souls, every day, and especially when we find or feel ourselves to be dropped into the wilderness.

You’ve maybe seen in the news about how bread-making has become quite a “thing” during the pandemic. All kinds of folks, stuck at home, time on their hands, are baking bread. One theologian has wondered if there’s not more going on here than a simple time-filling new learning experience? Maybe there’s something about bread itself, she ponders. Bread—the foundation of civilization. Bread-baking giving us a sense agency in the midst of uncertainty, even a sense of hope.

I think God may be offering us a wonderful new kind of generative partnership here. We faltering humans get involved, kneading the dough, in awe as it rises up. Our daily bread. And God continues to promise to rain down bread from heaven, our daily bread, spiritual renewal, hope restored.

In these holy days, may we join our hearts with our Jewish sisters and brothers, rejoicing in the hope of a new year. May we turn to our God, the patient, consistent provider of every good gift. May we turn towards God and remember God’s mercy and graciousness towards us. May we pick up the life of liberty in this wilderness, in this new school of the soul, and resolve to live this new year in a closer walk with God, becoming a better version of ourselves, seeking, praying, turning, reviving, being revived, again and again, through that love that never lets us go, is always with us, raining down from heaven bread and hope in abundance, new every day. Choose life!

Notes: