

A reading from Numbers 16,

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin...In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. 16 This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer^[a] for each person you have in your tent.'" 17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed. 19 Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." 20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.

I know that it seems like a weird place to start – with moldy, maggoty manna. And yet what happens in this journey with the Israelites plays out over and over again in our congregations. We set-out and embark on mission and then things get hard and we start to complain and wonder, "Where are you God?" And God answers in a variety of ways with manna that fills our souls – and then we cling. Cling to that scrap of manna because it was so good and we are so afraid that there will not be enough for tomorrow. Our churches, many of whom are struggling now, had manna surrounding them at one point in their history and they long for that day. But in their longing they have held on to that slice of manna for years – and it is maggoty. I was sharing this example with some leaders in Hickory, and a woman added, but at least I know what my moldy manna tastes like. Who knows what God will put in my hand if I open it? Now let me say this, especially for congregations with long history. Do not shame what people are clinging too – understand that it was manna at one point that is why they cling so hard. Moses invites the community to carry an omer of manna in a jar with them everywhere they go to remember. Listen and wonder what from the original manna is part of your omer that you will carry into a new future.

The work for you as leaders and stewards of the vision in purpose in your place is to help open hands, pray boldly for daily bread, and trust it will come. And here is the deal, our human hands will cling to moldy manna without a compelling vision of new manna. So what is the vision? What purpose is God calling your community into? Where is God leading your congregation?