August 2021

Dear Friends in the Journey,

As I write this, a lot is unfolding in life. This may always be the case, but it feels particularly pronounced right now.

Many of you may know that my parents moved from Manchester, NH to Rochester, NY about 2 months ago and have really been enjoying the new surroundings. My mom’s health, however, took a difficult turn recently where she broke her left femur (not from a fall but from part of the condition that she has) and had to have surgery on that leg. As a preventive measure, doctors put a rod into her *other* femur as well and now, as they say, she does not have a led to stand on (well, thankfully, she now has 2 stronger femurs, but she has to get used to waking on them again).

As you might imagine, losing mobility like that changes a lot and we have come through a good deal of uncertainty while she was in the hospital. There are always uncertainties related to anesthesia, the procedure itself, recovery, etc. and many more remain with respect to recovery and rehabilitation. I know that so many of you know this firsthand or have gone through it with loved ones (or are going through it right now).

In addition to this personal situation, I have been weighed down by the massive environmental/climate events that are happening all around the globe – and especially here in the United States. I can only imagine what so many are going through as they literally watch their towns be incinerated, watch as their homes are washed away or watch as their livestock and crops die from lack of water. And if the predictions are right, we’re really only getting started with these climate events.

On top of that COVID continues yet another wave. The delta variant is spreading like its own kind of wildfire, and infection rates keep soaring – overwhelming hospital systems and community response teams in ways we have not seen in a while.

Many days, I just don’t know how to take it all in.

And yet, we profess faith a God who has promised to be present to us and provide for us through it all. I know, however, that my faith gets tested – whether by the personal uncertainty or the collective – and I wonder if God’s really got our backs. How is God providing for us these days when so much seems to be going in the other direction?

That’s what we will take up in these reflections.

I am hoping that you and yours are holding steady in the midst of so much. I know that no matter what, life is a continual mix of difficulty and joy, celebration and sorrow. And as we approach the waning days of this summer season, may we drink in all that it has to offer and celebrate so many of the fruits of the earth coming to our tables at this time of year.

Blessings,

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**I. Fire-starter Questions**

1. When you hear the phrase, “God will provide” what do you think about?

2. Have you ever doubted it? (or what would get you doubting it)

3. Have there been times when you have experienced God “providing” even if it did not look like what you thought it would (or should) look like?

**II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Exodus 16: 2-4; 13-16; 19**

*In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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.” 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 the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 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. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need…Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.”*

**Matthew 7:7-8**

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

**Philippians 4; 6-7; 18-19**

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus…I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied…And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*

**III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. What stands out to you in the story of the manna? How does God “provide” for the people? What are they asked to do with those gifts?

2. How do you understand this passage from Matthew? Do you think it means that everything that you ask for will be granted? Why would God not “grant” some of what we ask? Would any other forces prevent our asks from being granted?

3. What are some of the key elements that you notice in Paul’s advice to the Philippians? What does having “more than enough” mean to you?

**IV. Commentary**

As I mentioned in the opening, there’s so much going on in our personal lives and in the world that is cause for concern and might even be at the level of crisis. Like me, you might pray about things and offer requests to God – with little seemingly changing. I know that I can often start to wonder, “Why doesn’t God DO SOMETHING about this? How is God PROVIDING for us?”

Bottom line, I don’t know and I am not even sure I try to understand it anymore.

But….I have a few ideas I’d like to share about all this stuff.

First of all, a little bit about stories.

One of my favorite writers, Rebecca Solnit, has written extensively about crises and what they offer us in terms of opportunities for transformation. She says that it is so hard to be “in the middle of stories” because there’s so much uncertainty about how the stories are going to end.

Naturally we get nervous. We don’t want a “bad” ending to our story. No one wants to suffer or be hurt. Like all sentient beings, we try to avoid these things.

This is where Buddhism offers a lot of insight for me.

One of the Buddha’s basic principles (and, of course, I am paraphrasing) is that there are essentially two problems in life: we get what we want and we don’t get what we want. When we get what we want, we grow attached to it (persons, things, roles, status, etc.). Deep down we know that life is constantly changing, so now we get concerned or afraid that we’re going to lose what we have become attached to. We then start spending time trying to protect it and shore it up so it doesn’t change. Problem #1.

Problem #2 is that we do not get what we want and now have to deal with difficult emotions of disappointment, loss, sadness and anger. These are hard to hold and work through.

Buddha says that, either way, the fundamental problem is attachment.

The great poet David Whyte in his 2021 book Consolations speaks about the word ‘heartbreak.’ In that descriptions he says something similar to what I have described (but oh so much more eloquently):

*Heartbreak is unpreventable; the natural outcome of caring for people and things over which we have no control…[and it] begins the moment we are asked to let go but cannot …Heartbreak, we hope, is something we hope we can avoid…where the elemental forces of life will keep us in the manner to which we want to be accustomed…*

This offers me a lot of help in understanding my thinking around God’s “providing” for me.

What I think I mean when I say, “I hope God provides for me,” is really, “I hope God provides for me in a way that maintains everything that I am used to….” It doesn’t sound so great when I write it out, but it probably is more true than not. Maybe you mean something different when you petition God, but I would submit that most of us would really like to keep things as they are and tend to seek God’s assistance in keeping them that way.

What I think is also true is that that when we say, “God will provide,” we are not the ones who get to specify the HOW or the WHAT that God provides. That’s another big stumbling block for me. In my prayer time, I often want to micromanage God – offering all kinds of ideas on what I may need or want in the relationship and/or just outright specifying the outcomes that I want to see happen (and kind of expecting that God would go along with them).

We see this in the manna story. The Israelites can only conceive of the bread of their taskmasters as the way to satisfy their hunger. They have become so conditioned to one way of being provided for that other, unexpected ways may not occur to them. God sends this substance that enables them to live and carry on, but it was not what they expected at all. In fact they did not even recognize it as food.

We may not be far from that as well. Perhaps we have grown used to one way of being provided for and can’t envision that another way of life could provide for us as well (and maybe even in a better way). So we hold on to what we know. Sometimes what God provides for us might even feel like a form of suffering and not provision at all.

This is probably a good place for a brief pause. What are you thinking or feeling as you read this?

Theologian and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor “*If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to go hungry a lot. When you do not get the miracle you are praying for, you are going to think that God is ignoring you or punishing you or – worse yet – that God is not there…. Meanwhile you are going to miss a lot of other things God is doing for you because they are too ordinary…”*

I don’t know about you, but when I specify to God what my manna has to look like (the outcome I want), I *will* go hungry often and might develop a lot of distorted ideas about who God is, how God works, etc. And I will likely miss so many of the ordinary miracles that are right in front of me – because I am looking elsewhere or have defined “God will provide” in only one way.

I also know that my life in this culture has bloated and distorted my perspective on what a blessing is. I hate to admit it, but I have developed a sort of entitlement related to life. I especially see this come out when simple, everyday things do not work – things that are luxuries in most countries and would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. But many of us live in a world of such excess that we can barely distinguish between need and want at times.

Another pause.

A few more reflections. Then a wrap.

When I think about something like the climate crisis and the wildfires, drought and flooding we’re seeing, I do not blame God. For me these are the result of choices that we (collectively) have made that have now impacted the world and how it works. The devastation is hard to watch, and it may even get worse. But we need to claim our responsibility in events, and these seem to be very much the result of human choices that have severely impacted how our planet works.

That being said, our response to them may, in fact, be the provision of God. Like I said, I do not think that God “causes” these events but can use them for our transformation. I have been incredibly encouraged by how people have responded to one another (generally) during these crises and during so much of the COVID pandemic. We have seen an emergence of free food stations, mutual aid, acts of kindness and generosity and a questioning of business as usual.

Rebecca Solnit in her book, *A Paradise Built In Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise In Disaster*, chronicles how – even in places of great disaster – humans often respond in ways that help to shore each other up. It is as if we return to some basics – like the exhortation from Exodus – to take what we need and make sure that everyone has enough. And, lo and behold, when we do this, God does, in fact, provide enough – even more than enough – to go around.

Most likely it is not God who stops the chain of provision. We stop it through our greed and hoarding. And, perhaps, God is waiting on us to be the providers related to someone else’s prayers but either our own short-sightedness or systemic failures keep that blessing from finding its true home.

This whole conversation also gets me thinking about how we think about prayer – which I will likely take up in a subsequent set of reflections - because how we think about prayer reflects so deeply how we think about God. Very briefly, if we view prayer as a form of trying to get God to do things for us or act on our behalf, then of course we will be consistently disappointed in life. If our goal, however, is to be in a conscious, loving relationship with God, then outcomes to what we pray for will not, ultimately, decide whether God has provided for us or not.

We hear echoes of this in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul offers a pretty concise summary of trusting that “God will provide” in telling us not to be anxious. He outlines a few steps in the process:

*1. Offer prayers and petitions, but start with thanksgiving (we might call this gratitude)*

*2. Feel the peace that comes from being in relationship with God*

*3. Do an accurate assessment of what is already in your life (Paul says that he is amply supplied – meaning that he knows what enough is)*

*4. Then, and only then, wait on God to grant what you need*

What I love about this process – that I wish I did more often – is that it starts with gratitude. Start going through the list of all that God has *already* done for you. All the needs that have *already* been supplied. All the small/ordinary miracles that have *already* come your way. All the blessings you have *already* been given. Paul says rest in that awareness for a bit. Then ask God for what seems to be lacking.

There’s clearly so much more that could be said on this idea that “God will provide”. I know that I am continually humbled in my work by the witness of so many people of deep faith who, even in the midst of economic insecurity, hardship, loss and suffering testify that “God has been so good to me.” It is they who have taught me some of the most profound lessons on God helping to get people through and providing for us – even when we could not see or understand it.

**V. Action Step**

One action I will take after reading these reflections is…