

In the holy name of God, the creator, the redeemer, and the sustainer. Amen.

I wonder if your grandparents ever told you stories, or if you are a grandparent, what kind of stories do you enjoy telling your grandchildren? I grew up with plenty of stories from my grandparents, some my brothers and I heard so many times that we avoided situations where we would hear them yet again. And other ones we treasured no matter how many times they were told.

My maiden name is Bok, B-O-K, which in Dutch translates to goat. Both of my grandparents, Goldie and Garrett Bok immigrated to the United States when they were young children to a place called New Holland, South Dakota. If you went to New Holland, South Dakota today, here is what you would find: a stoplight, a Christian Reformed Church, a post office, and that's it.

My grandmother was the youngest of 12 siblings, and my grandfather the youngest of 11. One day I asked my grandmother what her middle name was, and she replied, "Well, I don't have one," and I thought that was rather odd, so I said, "Well, why not?" And she said her mother had flat run out of names by the time she got to her, and so she was always just Goldie.

They arrived in South Dakota in time for the Great Depression to start, and most of the stories I heard were from that time period growing up on a farm with a dozen siblings in the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. When my brothers and I were at their house, we knew better than to complain about the food. Because on the occasion that my grandmother would put a plate of food in front of us that we didn't like or didn't recognize, and turn our noses up at it, she would tell us about radish sandwiches, which according to her, she ate plenty of because that's all the food they had, and there was no mayo and there was no butter, just radish and bread, and if she can eat that, then we can eat this.

On another day, I received notice that the bus route for middle school had been scheduled, and I was on the first stop, needing to be up and out the door at the crack of dawn. I groaned in agony at my very clear misfortune, when my grandfather told me that he never had the opportunity to go to seventh grade because that's when kids needed to start working. His first job was driving the school bus.

In another memory, on one of my birthdays, I came into the garage to find a gift from my grandparents, a brand-

new bike, a child's dream, only to burst into tears. It was in fact not the color that I asked for, which prompted another and final story. My grandmother always wanted a bike when she was growing up, but they could not afford one at the time, and so her siblings and her would play bikes. "And how do you play bikes?" You might ask, I asked. And this is how you do it. You lay on your back and put your feet in the air and imagine pedaling down hills. This is playing bikes that they did for hours.

In my later years, I reflected on the stories that my beloved grandparents told me, and I assumed what they were trying to do was make me feel guilty for the privileges that I grew up with. Eventually, the depression ended, they got better jobs, moved to a city with industry, sent their children and grandchildren to college, and their life no longer resembled growing up in the Dust Bowl, and neither did mine. But I don't think they were trying to make me feel guilty. I think they were trying to instill in me a sense of gratitude.

Memories of my own complaining remind me of the Israelites groaning on in the desert, "It would be better if we were still slaves in Egypt," they whined. "Maybe that Pharaoh guy wasn't so bad after all," they murmured as if they had completely erased the story of their liberation from the hand of Pharaoh, as if the seven signs that God rained down on the Egyptians had not been enough, as if they had forgotten the taste of freedom given by a God who had indeed never forgotten them. But alas, God hears our cry even when it sounds an awful lot like spoiled children, and sends them manna, which translates to --what is it? According to the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, the answer to the question, what is it, has two possible answers. The first is probably the more widely accepted or assumed, that in the middle of the night God rained down this mysterious substance out of the sky to feed hungry people. The second is that in the desert where this story takes place, there is a type of bug that feeds on plant lice that are rich in carbohydrates and nutrients. In order to get the sustenance they need, the bugs have to eat a lot of this lice, and in the cool of the night what their bodies don't use, they get rid of in the form of little white flakes, which could feed a hungry person in the desert. So, manna, what is it? It might be the leftovers from the bugs. I have no way of confirming or denying what version of the story is true, but it begs the readers to question, is the miracle that God rained a mysterious substance out of the sky, or is the miracle

that God fed the hungry people with what was right in front of them, they just didn't see it yet?

In my own life when I feel like a hungry Israelite in the desert and I feel particularly complainy or grumbly, bogged down by what seems to me as my huge problems in life, and I am tempted to tell God my list of grievances and complaints, well, woe is me, to quote the prophet. I try to first look for some manna that is right in front of me. I grab an empty glass, go over to the sink, turn on the faucet, and just like that, water comes out, manna from heaven. I repeat this mantra, there is a roof over my head, clothes on a healthy body, food in the fridge, manna from heaven. I text a friend or a family member and say, "Hey, I'm just thinking about you. Hope you're having a good day," manna from heaven. I look for any sign of life, any gift that has been given to me that I have yet to notice, even if it looks like the bugs' leftovers, manna from heaven.

Another practice comes to me every night at the blissful hour of a child's bedtime. For two years now, my eldest daughter and I, after dinner and baths, pajamas and books, crawl into bed at the end of a long evening, and she looks up, and she's got these big blueberry eyes and says, "Let's talk about my fun day." And when we first started doing this, I said, "Okay. Well, you went to school," hoping to move this process along here like, "Let's get to the bedtime." But she replied, "No, no, no. Let's start at the beginning." "Okay. Well, you woke up." "Oh, yeah. That's a good part. I like that part," she says, "and then we went to breakfast." We used to eat in a cafeteria at the school where I served as chaplain and she would say, "Oh, yeah, and at breakfast we saw Kathy. She is so nice." "Yeah, she is really nice." "And then school, rest time, play time, back to the cafeteria for dinner," all marked by notes on how lovely it all was, our completely normal and ordinary day full of manna that I had yet to see. "Oh, and we had meatballs for dinner." We had meatballs at the cafeteria 95% of the time that we were there. If they didn't have them, we just went home. And every night she would say, "Oh, yeah. Those meatballs are so delicious." "Yeah, they are." I walk out of that room each night feeling like I just won the lottery, like I am the luckiest person on the face of this earth. I come downstairs and all of the things that I felt like grumbling about, I don't see them that way anymore. Instead, they look an awful lot like a gift I should say thank you for.

And so, I have to believe or at least wonder if a life of faith is not about having everything we want handed to us the way that we want it, but trusting that even in the

desert there will be manna, even if it's the bugs' leftovers. To quote the gospel of the Rolling Stones, "you can't always get what you want", but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.

One last story. Before we left New Hampshire to move to California, I scheduled my youngest daughter Nora's baptism in one of our favorite spots. It's a place called Church Island, and it was really important to me that we do it there before we left. Church Island is this beautiful old wooden chapel in the middle of our favorite lake. You have to take a boat to get there. It's just gorgeous and so peaceful, and it was scheduled to be this really great day.

Our family and our friends were all coming in. I was scheduled to preach and baptize my daughter, not things you get to do every day. So, I wanted it to be special, and I really wanted to be thoughtful about what I was going to say in the sermon. So, I wrote it rather far in advance and I thought, "Oh, this is good. I've got a great sermon here." And I tucked it away, and the night before, I took it out to read it again before we were going to go out, and I read it and thought, "Well, I have to put it in the garbage. I have to scrap it and start over." - because I wrote what I wished baptism did, which is this: I wish that baptism protected us from every harm and every cruelty of the world. I wish it meant that we would never know heartbreak and never know what it was to be hungry. I wish it guaranteed us an easy life, and that it meant that God answered our prayers in a timely fashion, the way we would like them to be answered. I wish it meant there was no desert.

But that is in fact not what baptism does. I would actually argue that that's not a life of faith at all. Here's what it is about, baptism: the Christian faith, the Israelites being fed in the desert. It's about a God who liberates us from the hands of Pharaohs, who hears our cry even if it does sound like a complaint, whose love and care for us knows no bounds, who promises us that there will be nourishment for us even in the desert, even if it looks like leftovers, if only we have the eyes and hearts to see it.

To our baptismal candidate, Carter Andrew, in your journey of faith, may it all be so.

Amen.