

Cultivating A Conservationist Mindset

Pastor Shelley Cunningham

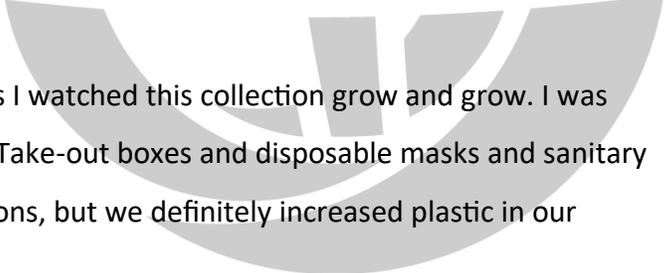
Exodus 16:-4a, 9-21, 31a NRSV

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The 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." ⁴Then 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.

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"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.'" ¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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. ¹⁶This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." ²⁰But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

³¹The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

This little bouquet sits on the shelf above my kitchen sink. They're not flowers. They're coffee cup plugs. I've shared before that I signed up for a Panera daily coffee subscription a year ago February – just in time for everything to shut down. But I was determined to get my money's worth. Panera South is a little over a mile from my house, and they were still doing carryout. So just about every day, I'd walk over there and get breakfast. It was definitely one of the bright spots of the pandemic. I don't know when I started collecting the



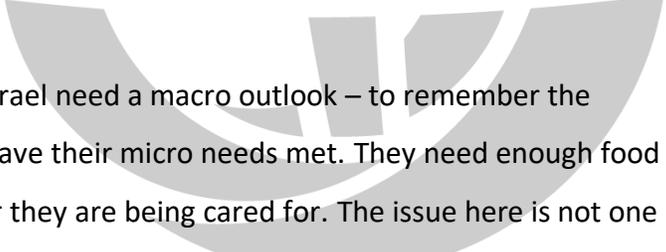
coffee sticks. But I do remember feeling just a little guilty as I watched this collection grow and grow. I was accumulating so much garbage. We all were – remember? Take-out boxes and disposable masks and sanitary wipes? They say in 2020 we may have reduced auto emissions, but we definitely increased plastic in our landfills.

For the past couple of weeks we've been getting alarming news about the climate from the COP26 environmental summit. The earth's core temperature is rising at twice the rate that scientists believe is sustainable. Governments have made progress at setting goals but there really is no way to hold any of them accountable.

Dr. Jay Michaelson says it's a macro/micro issue. On a micro level, he says, there is nothing any of us individually can do that will have a measurable effect on our changing climate. The average American produces 16 tons of carbon emissions a year. Turning off the lights when you leave a room might reduce – marginally – the amount of energy you use, but it doesn't reduce the amount of energy that's produced. Switching to a reusable coffee cup might keep me from throwing away 7 cups a week, but I'm just one customer and Panera sells a lot of daily coffee. So why bother? Well, Dr. Michaelson says, because the very micro act of flipping that light switch or reminds us that it's going to take macro-level change – governments pledging to pass laws that can make a wholesale difference; businesses adapting their models of operating; citizen working together to clean up their community. And without those macro changes, we're sunk.

That macro/micro approach was exactly what was facing the people of Israel. It had been a little more than two months since they'd crossed the Sea of Reeds from slavery to freedom. But they were worried – about the future, yes, but just as much about the present. They knew God had promised to lead them to the promised land, but they didn't know what that meant. How long would it take? How would they know when they were there? Would they be ok in the meantime? Why was the journey so hard? And it was hard. They didn't have safety or security. At times there was no water to drink. There wasn't enough food to eat. So people did what they often do in times of uncertainty: they wallowed in nostalgia. *Remember how good it was in Egypt, when we had meat to eat and knew where we were going to sleep at night?* They had conveniently forgotten the reality of life under Pharaoh. Let's be honest, the good old days are rarely as good as we think they were. But it's easier to paint a picture of a rosy past than of an unclear future. That's just as true for us today than it was then.





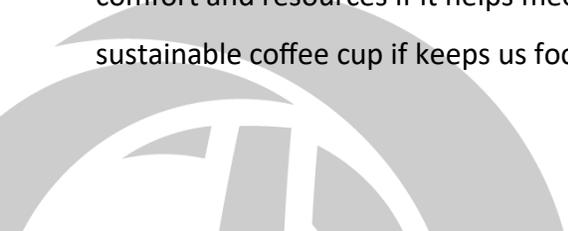
Notice what God does, though. God knows the people of Israel need a macro outlook – to remember the bigger picture. But in order to focus on that, they have to have their micro needs met. They need enough food to eat, water to drink, places to sleep at night to remember they are being cared for. The issue here is not one of commitment, but of cultivating trust. Do they trust God to keep God’s promises? And will that trust be enough to carry them into an uncertain future?

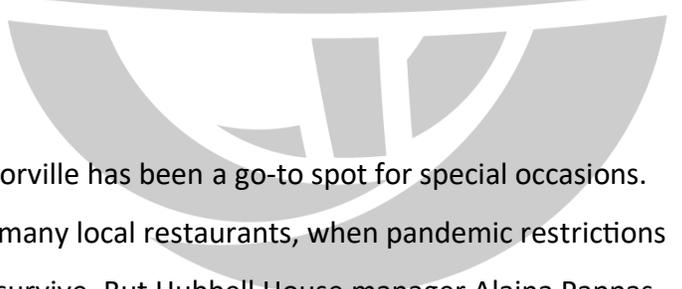
Isn’t that still the question for us today? We’re in a time of high anxiety everywhere. We’re tired. Few of us are operating as our best selves. Transitions are hard. And the future is uncertain. We might indulge in nostalgia now and again, thinking of the good old days.

But it was hard in the wilderness too. And God found a way to help the Israelites remember, one day at a time, that they would be cared for. God will do the same for us. That patience and faithful tending to sabbath were the best ways to foster the peace and purpose that would carry them through. God will do the same for us.

Professor Beth Tanner writes that “It’s easy to see God’s gifts here as belonging to a long-ago people who are dependent on God.” But doesn’t God still provide for what we need today? We may not wake up to manna covering our front yards, and we know that farmers work hard to grow the food that feeds us. But it is God who created the seeds that miraculously sprout to become the food. Yes, our planet is filled with fossil fuels that can power our cities and run our vehicles. But God also works through technology and innovation and people who are coming up with new ways that might provide cleaner, more sustainable ways of living. God’s methodology is just a little different. Like those wilderness wanderers, we all depend on God for our daily bread. So can we put ourselves in their shoes and see the ways God provides for us. Can we put ourselves in their shoes and see all those ways God provides through us? Can we get beyond our micro worries and see the big picture of what God is up to – in our lives, in our church, in our community, and beyond?

In many ways, this is a stewardship question. Stewardship is often mistakenly seen as simply giving our money to support the church. But stewardship is really about caretaking – paying attention and tending to everything God has made, recognizing that we are partners with the creator. On a macro level, that means advocating for justice and good government, and remembering that we are but one generation in a long line of many. On a micro level, that means using what we have for the good of all people and being willing to sacrifice our own comfort and resources if it helps meet the needs of our neighbor – and turning off the lights and switching to a sustainable coffee cup if keeps us focused on the need to work for systemic change.





Here's an example: for decades the Hubbell House in Mantorville has been a go-to spot for special occasions. How many of you have had a celebratory meal there? Like many local restaurants, when pandemic restrictions hit the Hubbell House was concerned about how they would survive. But Hubbell House manager Alaina Pappas said one couple came up to her last year. We've been here for every wedding anniversary for the past 20 years, they said. And we want to be here for our wedding anniversary for 20 more. So they decided to buy dinner from the Hubbell House every Tuesday – for over a year. Steak from a box at their kitchen table was not the same as steak on china in that historic dining room. But, they said, it was well worth it to remember the memories of the past – and create hope for the future. They knew what they wanted to preserve for the next generation, and they wanted to do their part.

Friends, being a good steward means exactly that. Asking yourself two questions: what to me is worth preserving? And what am I willing to do to preserve it?

Your answer to those two questions just might be what guides us through these uncertain times. They remind us of the macro view – that the picture is bigger than just what we can see right now. And they give us a micro course of action – a way to practice our values, to show others what's important, and to show and grow our faith one day at a time.

I invite you to spend a little time this week reflecting on those two questions: what is worth preserving, and what am I willing to do to preserve it. It might apply to your family, to your church, to your planet. The answer to those questions can be your guide, and can help you understand how your actions can have a lasting impact.

Here's the thing: We don't undergo any of those things alone. God is the one who makes all things possible. God is the one who calms our fears and enlarges our perspective. That's what God did for the Israelites when they couldn't see beyond their immediate needs: God provided meat and manna faithfully day and night for 40 years – gifts of sustenance to care for their bodies. God provided a day of rest – the gift of focused time to take a deep breath, and give thanks, and remember who and whose we are. Those gifts are here for us too.

When we focus on those things, when we look around on all of the gifts that God has entrusted to us, we cultivate that conservationist mindset that will sustain our faith and change our world. Amen.

