The Challah in the Ark
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A story is told about a baker who used to bake bread every Friday afternoon and hoped that one day he could bring that bread to God. He wanted to give the bread as a gift to say thank you for the bounty that was his life.

And, so, one day, the baker decided to try an experiment. He baked a couple of fresh loaves of challah and walked into the sanctuary, opened up the ark, placed the challah in the ark and closed the doors. Then, the baker walked out.

Now, right around that same time, the shammash of the community happened to be feeling very sorry for himself. He had a wife and a son and wished that he could provide freshly baked bread for his family. But he knew that on the salary of the person who cleans the synagogue and sets up the books, there was no way that he was going to be able to buy the challah he needed each week. Instead, he was left with scraps of bread he could collect from leftover meals that he knew were going to become a great Shabbat dinner for his household.

So, one day when he was so sad, he walked up to the ark and looked up at God and said, "God, I know I am just a poor shammash, but please give me a challah for Shabbat." And, at that moment, he began to smell the wafting scent of challah coming his way. He ripped open the curtains of the ark, and sitting there right next to the Torah was freshly baked challah for his family. And he looked up at God, and he said, "This is a miracle." Grabbing the challah, he ran home and enjoyed it with his family.

The next day was Shabbat morning, and the whole community had gathered together, including the baker who stood ready for the Torah service. You see, the baker hoped that God would take this challah from him, but he knew that it would be a very, very, very miraculous event that would occur if God did. And, so, when the rabbi walked up to the curtain, the baker sat forward waiting to find out whether the challah would remain. And, as the rabbi opened the ark, the baker saw that there was no challah in the ark anymore. It had disappeared.

On the inside, he was celebrating; but he was behaving on the outside, knowing that he was in synagogue—but all the while he was thinking to himself that God had taken his gift and had eaten the challah!

The baker knew that he wanted to do the same thing the next week. So, he baked the bread, and he rushed over to the synagogue. He placed the bread in the ark, closed the curtains and walked away. And only a short time later, the shammash walked up to the ark and opened the curtains, praying to God and seeing the challah there for his family. Days became weeks and weeks became months as every week the baker would drop off the challah and the shammash would take it.

Then, one day, the baker walked quietly into the synagogue with his challah. After opening the ark, he began to place the bread under the Torahs when the rabbi walked in. She looked at the baker and said, "What are you doing?" And the baker replied, "Every Shabbat, I drop off challah for God, and God takes that challah and eats it." And the rabbi responded, "I don't believe you. Miracles don't work like that. Let's hide in the back and see what's going on."

And, so, the two of them sat among the pews hunched down, waiting to find out what actually happened to the challah that the baker brought week after week.

Only a few minutes passed before the shammash shuffled in. Standing by the curtain, the shammash looked up at the heavens and said, "God, every week you don't disappoint me. Every week you provide challah for my family. God, give me challah for Shabbat, please." The shammash ripped open the curtains only to find that this time the challah was never placed in the ark.

And he looked around, only to see the rabbi pop up. The rabbi, holding the challah the shammash was supposed to have, said, "You think that God gave you this challah every week? But it was not God." And she turned to the baker, and she said, "And you think God ate your challah every week? But it wasn't God. The two of you have been giving and eating the challah every week. God is nowhere in this story."

But no sooner did the rabbi say that that the rabbi grew quiet and said, "You know what? I'm wrong. God actually is all over this story." She turned to the baker and said, "You were providing challah for him. In that moment you were God, feeding the people of the earth." And she turned to the shammash, and said, "His act of kindness was, in fact, God providing food for your family."

And from then on, she sent the shammash home and said to him, "We will make sure that every single Shabbat God does provide the challah for you." And she arranged that every single Friday afternoon, two freshly baked loaves of challah would arrive at the household of the shammash, because, you see, they were ready to be God's partners in providing food for a hungry man and his family.

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We've all been the shammash, longing for something that we cannot provide for ourselves. And we've all had the opportunity to be the baker, quietly offering help to someone in need.

During this season of Thanksgiving, let's reflect on the blessings in our lives—the food on our tables, the company of loved ones and the opportunities to give back. Let us be grateful, not just for what we receive but for the chance to be someone else's miracle.