

Looking Fear in the Face
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Exodus 14:5-14 Numbers 21:4-9

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Nostalgia is a funny thing. “Remember the good ole’ days?” “You just can’t do things the way you used to anymore.” “Things were simpler back then.” The way people have always been prone to nostalgia, you’d think that the world has just been getting worse and worse for centuries. Nostalgia plays back our memories in a cozy, sepia-toned glow. We were free of those things that currently weigh down our hearts. Things were familiar back then, stabler and more predictable. It was less dangerous and uncertain. But the truth is, violent crime rates have been steadily declining over the past decades. Medical advancements have improved quality of life and life expectancy for many people. We have come ever closer to the social equality that we have been striving for. Lately, there has been such strong nostalgia for the 1950s in our country, that there has been a movement to try to return aspects of our society back to how things were then. Of course, that was before the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, before marriage equality, even before women were no longer required to have a male cosign to apply for a credit card. While nostalgia serves us well as an occasional comforting escape, maybe it isn’t always our most honest friend.

I’ve been thinking about this phenomenon as I’ve been reading about the Israelites’ time in the wilderness this week. The journey lasted many generations and involved many perils. But even at the very beginning of the journey, before the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds - the Red Sea - fear and doubt set in. If all the chariots of Egypt, including six hundred elite chariots - whatever that means - were bearing down on me and my loved ones, I’d have fear and doubt too. And I can only hope that I’d have something as clever and snarky to say as the Israelites did: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” With all those plagues and pleadings and hardened hearts, that would have been quite an elaborate scheme on Moses’ part all to simply have the Israelites killed where there was more real estate. But Moses says to them, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you.” And with one of the greatest miracles recorded in our sacred texts, God does deliver the Israelites.

But the Israelites are human and it doesn’t take long for them to begin murmuring their discontents again. Again, I don’t want to be too judgy; they’re asking for basic things like food and water. Though sometimes it seems nostalgia is playing tricks with their memories. At one point they reminisce about the cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic that they used to feast on in Egypt. They lament that back then they had fish for nothing. But it wasn’t for nothing. Even if a fraction of this fantastical memory were true, it cost them their freedom and humanity. But in the midst of the uncertain wilderness their bondage seems a fair price for familiarity and predictability. I wonder if they tell these stories to their children who do not know or remember what slavery was like, and I wonder if those children grow up believing a false history. One characterized more by the emotions of the storytellers than the reality of the time.

But it isn't the people's lamentations or delusions that really tick off our God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. It's the fact that when Moses sends scouts to check out the Promised Land, they can see how fruitful it is, but they are too intimidated, too frightened, by what it would take to reach it. So they lie to the Israelites and tell them it's not worth it. It's not that great after all. It would take too much work. And I think the Israelites are primed to believe it. It has been hard. They have constantly been tempted to give into their fears and doubts and these scouts give them an excuse to surrender to their base emotions rather than trust in God's covenant. That is why the wilderness journey takes 40 years. God essentially says, "Fine, don't go to the Promised Land. Your sabotage of your own people, your lack of faith, your tendency to dig in your heels when faced with something new and to drag your feet as I lead you toward liberation all have their own consequences. Your generation will not see the Promised Land. But your children will. Because I keep my covenant with my people." And so the people continue to wander and the perils of the wilderness continue to afflict them.

And then came the snakes. Up until now, the peoples' complaints have been leveled toward Moses. This time, though, the people speak out against Moses and God. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Okay, Israelites, do you not have any food or do you just not want to eat the food that you have? Their lack of faith is spreading into a lack of gratitude. Then God sends poisonous serpents into their midst. It's interesting that neither Moses, nor God, nor the narrator say that this is a punishment for the Israelites' actions. But the Israelites seem to think it is. They ask Moses to ask God to take the snakes away. God does not. But God gives the Israelites a way to live with them. God tells Moses to make a poisonous serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole. Yes, the snakes are still there and, yes, they still bite. But if someone is bitten by a poisonous serpent, they need only look up at the bronze serpent and they will be healed. Ironically, the only way to be healed is to look at the image of the very thing that has caused the hurt. But that's it. Take a moment, look up, face your fear, be healed. And continue on toward the Promised Land.

We've all experienced wildernesses of some kind in our lives. And usually they are accompanied by some form of nostalgia. In times of grief, we look back and long for that thing or person we've lost. In times of uncertainty, we look back and long for comfort and stability. When we are thrown into something new, we look back and long for the familiar. Even when we catch a glimpse of the healing and liberation that God has in store for us, it can be easy to convince ourselves that it's too scary, too hard, not worth it. Let's go back to what was working before. But the truth is that it probably wasn't working as well as our nostalgia tells us it was. Things were probably less stable and sustainable than we knew. In many cases, the "good ole' days" were not equally good for everyone and, as many an activist has stated, "None of us are free until all of us are free." And maybe they weren't as good for us as we'd like to remember. Maybe we'd just prefer the devil we know to the devil we don't know. But there aren't any devils in the stories we heard today. Just humans being human. A long journey from bondage to liberation with natural hazards like poisonous snakes. And "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping

steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

A time of pastoral transition is certainly a wilderness experience for a small rural church in a time such as this. And it can be so easy to glorify a past of full pews and a plethora of volunteers and programs. But fixating on nostalgia will not lead us to the Promised Land. That place flowing with milk and honey will not look like what was. It may even look a little scary to us, a little unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Getting there may be hard. It may mean doing without some things we are used to and holding space for something new to fill. It may mean looking our fear in the face, acknowledging it, accepting it even, and still trusting in God’s deliverance. Allowing God to heal us from that fear so it doesn’t overcome our integrity, faith, and gratitude. God is leading us toward something new and abundant and liberating. May we accept the call courageously, follow God’s way boldly, and journey together with joy and faith. Amen.