

Time To Make A Difference

“Time to Let Go of Nostalgia & Look Forward with Hope”

Exodus 16: 2-15 (off-lectionary; from two weeks prior)

Philippians 3: 4b-14

OT 27A-17

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Time To Make A Difference – Part 4

“Time to Let Go of Nostalgia & Look Forward with Hope”

I like to think that I’m a pretty happy guy. Hopefully pleasant to be around. I like to have fun. I tend to be a glass-half-full kinda guy.

But ask my family and they’ll quickly tell you, that’s not always the case. There are two times, in particular—two very clear times—when I’m far from fun to be around... actually rather unpleasant, I suspect. Those times? When I’m really hungry... or when I’m really tired.

Truth is... if I go too long without food or rest, I become cranky and short-tempered. My personality sort of shifts. For amid the pangs of hunger or exhaustion, the world just seems harder. Darker. Optimism just sort of bleeds out of me as a bad attitude begins to take root until I either eat, or get some rest.

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I remind myself of this whenever I read of Israel’s wilderness journey as we do this morning in Exodus. At the point our first lesson in Exodus picks up this morning... Israel had been journeying through the wilderness for two months. It’d been around eight short weeks since Moses led them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. Just eight weeks since they first set out for the Promised Land of Canaan that had belonged to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob long ago.

Still, the journey to this point hadn’t necessarily been easy. Just getting out of Egypt was traumatic enough... what with the plagues and the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. But no sooner had they escaped Egypt’s grip than they realized how tough the wilderness was going to be. In fact, by just the third day of their journey, the people began complaining to Moses how thirsty they were. It wasn’t that there was no water, mind you. It was that the water where they were tasted bitter to them. They said they couldn’t drink it. So they complained. And complained. Until their complaining grew so loud that Moses cried out to God for help. “Lord, help me.” So on just the third day of the journey, God had to show Moses where to send the people to get better tasting water they could drink.

Fast forward about six weeks, and we reach the lesson (we) Mike just read (to us). And what do we find here, but the Hebrew people complaining yet again. This time, not because they were thirsty, but because they were hungry. “If only we had died back in Egypt!” they complain. “At least there we had plenty of food and drink. At least in Egypt we didn’t have to wonder when we’d eat our next meal, or lie down for a good night’s rest.” “Oh Moses, if only we were back there. If only today was as it was back then. If only,” they complained. “If only...”

Again, I remind myself—they were tired... and they were hungry. I would've been complaining, too.

But how ironic that they were complaining because God had done the very thing they'd asked God to do. When they were slaves in Egypt... they cried out to God asking to be delivered from Egypt so they could return to their homeland. God heard their cries, and sent Moses to lead the way.

But now, just two months into the journey, they want to go back to being slaves? They complain they'd rather be slaves in Egypt than hungry and tired in the wilderness?

Makes you wonder... do they really remember what their past entailed? Have they already forgotten what it felt like to have no freedom? To live and work every day for an oppressor?

Or was it that they were they forgetting the worst parts of their past, and remembering only the best parts. Were they forgetting the pains of their abusive workload, and only remembering how in Egypt they ate a full dinner every night?

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Nostalgia can do that. As the historian Stephanie Coontz writes, "In personal life, the warm glow of nostalgia amplifies good memories and minimizes bad ones about experiences and relationships... It always involves a little harmless self-deception," she says, "like forgetting the pain of childbirth. (But) in society at large," she counters, "nostalgia can distort our understanding of the world in dangerous ways, making us needlessly negative about our current situation."¹

Israel was falling prey to nostalgia. Amid their hunger and exhaustion, they were longing for a place and time in Egypt they'd cried out to God to save them from. Yet... when God does... when God leads them out of Egypt... here they are... not trusting in the provisions of the One who saved them, and longing for the one who subjugated them. The irony couldn't be more palpable.

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Now, please let me clarify, my point here is not that looking back and appreciating where we've been is bad, or something we shouldn't do with regularity. Looking back is not only good, but essential to growth. It's essential that all of us—in our personal lives, and in our communal living—take regular moments to step back and look at where we've been; notice what we've done; see how far we've come; appreciate the good that has transpired and try to learn from the not-so-good. In fact, many of our psalms reveal it's often only when we look back at where we've been that we're able to see how God had been with us all along.

So please don't hear this as a critique on looking back. Or appreciating our history. We learn and we grow from knowing where we've been.

But nostalgia... nostalgia is something different from simply looking back. Nostalgia romanticizes the past at the expense of the future. Like Israel only seeing full bellies in their past and empty stomachs in their future, nostalgia wants us to forget about the pains and problems

¹ Stephanie Coontz, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/opinion/sunday/coontz-beware-social-nostalgia.html>

we've overcome... painting an overly rosy picture of yesteryear at the expense at our hope in days to come.

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I share all this because the Church—the Church universal, I mean—is pretty darn susceptible to it. I know quite a few retired pastors who've said something along the lines of, "I sure am glad I'm not a pastor today. Church and society just aren't what they used to be."

And I've heard strong men and women of faith, stalwarts in their churches says something along the lines of, "The problems of today make me glad I have more years in than I've got left to get out."

It's rather fatalistic, I think. But I also get it. Church and society aren't they used to be... 50 years ago... or 20 years ago... or even 5 years ago. That's true. In fact, most church scholars now suggest that the church is changing at such a quick pace that it is going to change more in the next 10 years than in the previous 100 combined.

Through the eyes of nostalgia, this could mean that the church's best days are behind it. That the church is losing its ability to make a difference in the world today. That the church is weaker than it's ever been... that the church is in an irretrievable spiral of decline... or so nostalgia would have us believe.

But that doesn't take into consideration the number of churches that are growing in the 21st century. And the revitalization efforts that are bearing fruit in our own Baltimore Presbytery. And some of the exciting new ways in which the church is discovering how to be the body of Christ in the 21st century.

But even more to the point, when we fall prey to nostalgia, we stop asking one of the most important questions people of faith must always ask themselves. "Just what is God up to?" "What is God doing... here... and now... with me... and the people around me?" "What is God asking me to do? Where is God asking me to go? What is God trying to accomplish here and now, Towson Presbyterian Church?"

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As the Reformed theologian Marty Copenhaver says so well, "As Christians, we are assured that the good old days, no matter how good, are nothing compared to what God has in store for us."

It's why Paul is so emphatic in his letter to the Philippians. "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

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So, Towson Presbyterian Church, as we've been talking about now for four weeks in this sermon series... We who are called to this thing called discipleship... We who are blessed with God's grace and the call to extend it... We who are invited to participate not only in our own transformation, but invited to join as co-workers with Christ in the transformation of the world around us... the truth is that there will be days when we're hungry and we're tired and the world

just seems a bit darker... a bit harder. There will be days when nostalgia has its way with our perspective and we may doubt that tomorrow can possibly be brighter than yesterday. This past week... the scenes from Puerto Rico and Las Vegas and now Mississippi and Alabama have surely born this out.

But as people of faith... we also know that while it is good for us to look back, we are called to "lean forward." We're called to lean into what God is still doing... in this time... in this place. For God is still at work. God's Spirit is still on the move. God's promises for you and me and the world around us are as sure today as they've ever been... if we're but ready to help bring that promise to fruition. Which is why I believe the Church's best days still lie ahead, as God seeks to use us to make a difference in this world.

We must only be ready to explore... and participate... in what God is up to. Amen.