

Ex 16:2-15  
18 September 2011

### “Yearning for a Past that Never Was”

I ended last week’s sermon by noting that it’s easier to take the people out of Egypt, than to take Egypt out of the people! That’s a reference to the Israelites in the wilderness. In the example provided by today’s scripture reading, there’s a rather extreme case of pining for the good old days.

Last week, I also suggested that we actually read these stories; I especially pointed out the so-called “grumbling” or “murmuring” stories in chapters 15 to 17. (I won’t ask for a show of hands!) At the end of chapter 15, the people complain to Moses because they can only find bitter water. In this chapter, as we heard, the problem is hunger. In the next chapter, thirst will again be the problem.

It’s hard to find fault with the people’s complaining. They really do have something to be upset about. Last Sunday afternoon and evening, we had several hours without electricity. I told Banu that, while I was really looking forward to the restoration of power, compared with millions of people, I had nothing to gripe about.

A blunt example would be vast areas of the Horn of Africa. That is the **definition** of hunger and thirst. And while it’s not quite that dramatic, there is also hunger here at home.

But we can also understand how Moses and Aaron feel. They didn’t sign up for this job; it was thrust upon them! More than anyone else, it’s Moses who’s catching the flak. By the time we get to chapter 17, it seems clear that he’s nearing his breaking point.

Moses says to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” (v. 2). It is interesting how he so nicely identifies himself with the divine, but again, it’s completely understandable! Moses then turns on the one who drafted him into this business, crying out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me” (v. 4).

Having said that, I did mention a rather extreme—and somewhat irrational—longing for the good old days.

In verse 3 of this week’s reading, we hear, “The Israelites said to [Moses and Aaron], ‘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.’” What a lovely word: “fleshpots.” The Hebrew literally means “pots of meat.” They had an all-you-can-eat buffet, even if it wasn’t vegetarian friendly!

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “Why didn’t God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat?” It sounds like the taste of slavery was “mmm mmm good!”

And please correct me if I’m wrong, but it also sounds like they’re accusing Moses of actually **planning** their hardship! But as I suggested, that shouldn’t be a completely unexpected response. When people are beaten down and living in misery, they (we) can lash out, even at those working for good.

I've sometimes seen interviews of Russians who express a longing for the days of the Soviet Union. Back then, at least their jobs were guaranteed. In times of economic insecurity, political freedom may seem like a luxury. When there's rampant crime and corruption, it's easy to forget the fear that comes with a police state.

It can be easy to forget that the "good old days" weren't really so good when we were living them. We tend to romanticize the past. And we should note that the "good old days" are on a sliding scale. Depending on the color of one's skin, who one loves, the accent of one's speech, the good old days aren't remembered so fondly.

Please understand, I don't want to give the impression that, in and of itself, there's a problem with yearning for the past. It's normal; it's healthy. I'm now old enough to experience something of that myself. I think I began noticing it when I heard athletes **who were my age** being described as at the end of their careers!

Yearning for the past—indeed, a past that never was—becomes a problem when it takes us from where we need to be. It's a problem when it becomes destructive.

This "grumbling" or "murmuring" story is about something more fundamental than idealizing bygone days; it's about more than rewriting history. It's not about the Egyptians treating their slaves to fictitious buffets! It's about the way it expresses itself. It speaks to the corrosive effect of grumbling on the formation of community. That's the danger this story reveals.

One of the great spiritual documents of any age, the Rule of Benedict, speaks about this. We see in chapter 5: "If disciples obey grudgingly and grumble, not only aloud but also in their hearts, then, even though the order is carried out, their actions will not be accepted with favor by God, who sees that they are grumbling in their hearts." This was written for Benedictine monastics, but it obviously can apply to anyone of faith.

Sister Joan Chittister makes this relevant for all of us. "It is community that enables us both to live the Christian life and to learn from it. Human growth is gradual, Benedict knows—the grumblers and defiant are to be warned about their behavior twice privately—but grow we must." The bit about two private warnings is a reference to Matthew 18, where Jesus speaks about brothers or sisters who sin against us.

She continues, "Otherwise those who do not honor the community, those in fact who sin against the development of community in the worst possible way, by consistent complaining, constant resistance, or outright rebellion, must be corrected for it."<sup>1</sup> It's not fighting or theft that she highlights as the "worst possible" sin against developing community—it's constant complaining!

It should be pointed out that we're not talking about people who really are in dire straits. This isn't about people who suffer from depression; it's not about people who are tortured. It's not that kind of thing. This is something willful. The "worst possible" sin Chittister refers to is a decision. It's a decision that throws a monkey wrench into the works.

It's noted, "We come to the meetings...or go through the motions of being part of the community or part of the family...but there is no truth in us and we weigh the group down with our complainings. We become a living lamentation. We become a lump of spiritual cement around the neck of the group."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Chittister, 59.

Clearly, longing for the past and grumbling don't have to go together! As I suggested earlier, nostalgia (literally, a yearning for home or the past) can be a normal, healthy thing. And there's no end to the list that grumbling and murmuring may concern themselves with! But if you put all of those together, you've got a real tricky situation.

There is a sort of security in nostalgia. (The Russians who yearn for the Soviet days might be an example.) The past has already happened. It's frozen in time, however correctly or incorrectly it is remembered.

The prophet Haggai faces something like this. He lives during what's often called the second exodus, the return of the exiles from Babylon. When they see the ruins of the temple, they become dispirited. The city of Jerusalem has been torn apart. A feeling of inertia sets in, and they settle for building up their own property.

Haggai rouses the people to get going and rebuild the temple. He questions them, "why should you be living in well-built houses while [the] Temple lies in ruins?... Is there anyone among you who can still remember how splendid the Temple used to be? How does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all." (1:4, 2:3, GNB).

That can be a real danger with nostalgia. It can sap the spirit; anger can set in. Nothing will **ever** be as good as it used to be! And at the personal level, we can begin to think, "There are no more lessons for me to learn. There are no more lessons for me to **teach**. There is nothing more for me to do."

Still, we should notice something. Even though the Israelites are griping at Moses, there's no mention of reprimand from God. Okay, so when you were slaves in Egypt you could eat meat and bread to your hearts' content? Really? Well, here comes a flock of quail. And in the morning, you'll have more than enough bread!

The manna is the bread from heaven. Verse 15 says, "When 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.'"

Manna has been identified as a sugary sap that certain desert bushes produce. It hardens and falls to the ground. The Bedouin, a nomadic people, have been familiar with it for centuries. And Moses, during his long years in the wilderness, would have surely known about it. It seems that he was in training for his job long before he was recruited!

Some might say that the attempt to identify manna with something in nature takes something away from it. I see it differently. To me, insisting on a supernatural explanation distances us from the Bible. It distances us from these people. It reinforces the tendency to yearn for a past that never was.

If we don't see the supernatural in our own lives, we can miss out on what is right in front of us. We can miss the bread of heaven coming from ordinary things.

Joan Chittister, who I mentioned earlier, tells a story I'll paraphrase regarding a student asking the teacher about enlightenment, about wisdom.<sup>3</sup> (I should warn you that this may sound like a comedy routine!)

The student asks where wisdom, where enlightenment, can be found. "Here," the teacher replies. "When will it happen?" "It is happening right now."

"Then why don't I experience it?" "Because you do not look."

"What should I look for?" "Nothing. Just look."

"At what?" "Anything your eyes alight upon."

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<sup>3</sup> Chittister, 178.

“Must I look in a special kind of way?” “No. The ordinary way will do.”

“But don’t I always look the ordinary way?” “No. You don’t.”

“Well, why not?” “Because to look you must be here. You’re mostly somewhere else.”

Friends, that’s us! We spend a great deal, if not the majority, of our lives mostly somewhere else. On a special note: when we’re grumbling and murmuring, we aren’t present to what God is doing—right here, right now. When we’re occupied with a past that never was, we aren’t present to what God is doing—right here, right now. The bread of heaven is made available; we need only accept it.