

“Are We There Yet? and other Back Seat Complaints”

Exodus 16: 1-20

After a few detours along our summer road trip, we are ready to get back on the road again! We pick back up with the people of Israel as they make their way to the Promise Land. And what we find is....a lot of complaining! Murmurings and grumblings against Moses, all the people blaming him, blaming God for this perceived mess in which they find themselves. The first complaint, as we know, came as the people were stopped by the Red Sea. They blamed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, “to just die there by the hands of Pharaoh.” The second complaint came just a few verses after Miriam finished singing her song, a song which celebrates how God delivered God’s people, how God made a way out of no way. The strains of the Miriam’s song were still hanging the air when the people began to complain again. This time, accusing Moses of bringing them out of Egypt just to let them die of thirst in the wilderness. Again, God hears their cries, and again provides. God tells Moses to take a piece of wood, throw it in a pool of water, thereby changing it from bitter to sweet. And now, as we read today, the people are packing up from where they had camped, where they had stopped right after God had turned bitter water into sweet, and they begin complaining again. This time, accusing Moses of bringing them out of Egypt, only to let them starve to

death in the wilderness, this time stating that it would have been better for God to have killed them in Egypt than for God to have brought them out into this wilderness to die, this time falsely remembering how in Egypt, they were surrounded by pots of meat, and plenty of bread while in the wilderness, they have nothing.

At this point on the journey, the people have lost touch with reality. They have turned into backseat drivers with all their complaining. We can almost hear them, murmuring and grumbling... “Why are you going that way? Why don’t you go this way? It’s faster. Or “He’s touching me. She’s looking at me.” And of course how can we forget the all-time biggest backseat complaint... “Are we there yet?” Side note... You just know, at this point on the journey, Moses’ eye is just a twitching and all he wants to do is shout, “Does it look like we are there yet? Does this look like the land of milk and honey? or respond with a, “We’ll get there when we get there!” And of course, my favorite... “We just stopped. Are you sure you have to stop again?”

All joking aside, the people of Israel have turned into a whiny grumpy bunch of people. They have forgotten what it was really like in Egypt. They have forgotten that their life in Egypt consisted of brick quotes, broken backs, and bitter lives. They have forgotten how they were held captive by the Pharaoh and the systems of his empire, depending on the powers that be for everything. They did

not have plenty of bread. They certainly didn't have copious amounts of meat. Only the wealthy could afford that luxury. As slaves, as ones who were simply cogs in the machine, the people of Israel were lucky to receive the scraps off the table if they got anything at all. At this point on the journey, the people of Israel have forgotten what it was really like when they were slaves in Egypt. They have turned into whiny, grumpy spoiled children.

Now, let's face it, as we read this text, it is easy for us to point fingers at the people of Israel and say that would never be us. It is easy for us as modern day people of faith to seat back some two thousand years later and say, "Well, we would have never done that. Complaining about everything when God had just brought us out of slavery and oppression. It is easy for us as modern day disciples to look at the people of Israel at this point along their journey and righteously say, "The people of God should have been grateful for all that God had done for them. God had already showed them over and over again that God would take care of them, no matter what." Let's face it, it is easy for us to seat here in this sanctuary and say we would have never been like them. We would have been grateful. We would have trusted God. We would have just followed where God was leading.

But truth be told, deep down, we know differently... Because how many of us, myself included, how many of us have ever uttered the prayer, "God, I could really use your help right now. I know you are in the process. I am seeking your

wisdom. I need your guidance. I'm turning this worry over to you....but God, if you could just take care of this right now, I'd be happy. And God, while you are at it, how about you take care it in a way that doesn't change anything, that doesn't make me uncomfortable, you that keeps things just the way they are, that would be great.”

I am not going to even ask how many of us, myself included, have ever uttered this prayer. Because truth be told, I am ashamed to say that this is my prayer more often than I would like to admit. Which, makes me, makes us just like the people of Israel at this point on their journey. All of us, from the people of Israel to those of us sitting in the pews here today, we have seen, we have experienced God making a way out of no way, yet we cannot seem to trust the process. So, as modern day disciples, what right do I have, do we have to even think, we would have acted differently if we were a part of the situation in which the people of Israel find themselves as part of our reading today.

As we let this sink in for a moment, this knowing that we are not that different from the people of Israel, especially when we find ourselves in difficult situations, this knowing is our first clue that there is something more to this text than just a bunch of whiny grumpy people. This text is inviting us to open our eyes, to open our ears, to open our hearts and minds to what it is challenging us to see. It is challenging us to trust that there is enough. It is inviting us to let this

understanding of God's abundance shape how we live out our call in the here and now as the people of God. It is inviting us to be the people God created and calls us to be, people of hope, people of love, people who hold to the promises of God while we journey to the Promised Land.

Let me explain: In his book, "Healing the Heart of Democracy", renowned educator and theologian Parker Palmer states that "The part of our brain which is responsible for "fight or flight" can sometimes help species survive but it can also diminish or even destroy human beings." Let me say that again, Palmer states, that "the part of our brain which is responsible for "fight or flight" can sometimes help species survive but it can also diminish or even destroy human beings." Palmer goes on to describe how this basic instinct makes us uncomfortable living with tension, meaning that it forces us to choose between either/or. It does not encourage or cultivate a both/and existence.

Palmer states that as people of faith we know that there is a different way, a way taught to us by Jesus, a way shown to us by Jesus as he ministered with those on the margins. Jesus showed us a gap between the realities of our world and the world we know is possible. Palmer calls this, "the tragic gap" and that we as people of faith must learn how to stand and act in this "the tragic gap" — if we want to hang in for the long haul while birthing a better world, saying...

“On one side of that gap are the harsh and discouraging realities around us. On the other side is the better world we know to be possible — not merely because we wish it were so, but because we have seen it with our own eyes. We’re surrounded by greed, but we’ve seen great acts of generosity. We’re surrounded by violence, but we’ve seen people make peace.

The tragic gap will never close once and for all [through human efforts alone], a fact that can lead us into despair and resignation. But if we recall the ample evidence that “the better angels of our nature” are still with us, we are more likely to keep working at making the world a better place.

Palmer states that as people of faith, we live in this constant tension between seeing and experiencing the suffering of the world and wanting to make changes so that the vision of the Kingdom of God will become a reality here and now. He goes on to say, however, more often than not, our first reaction is to always follow “fight or flight instinct”, offering up quick fixes to complicated situations just to relieve this uncomfortable, frustrating tension created by this tragic gap. In response to this fight or flight instinct, Palmer offers this world of caution...as humanity, but more importantly as people of faith, what we don’t realize is that in choosing quick fixes, we often override the long term hope for freedom and well-being, not only for ourselves but for all of God’s children as well.

Or let me say it this way...This week, Starbucks shared that they would no longer be giving out plastic straws, that instead, they would create some sort of sippy cup which would eliminate the need for straws. And you would have thought, they had announced another red cup controversy just like they did a few years ago. No one is happy. Environmentalists, though accepting of this small change, accuse Starbucks of not doing enough. Others who like their straws and don't want to drink their 10 dollar Frappuccino without said straw, accuse Starbucks of taking away their right to having a straw. Others who have never used a straw at Starbucks are now angry that they don't have the option to use a straw if they so wish because Starbucks has forgotten that the very root of capitalism is letting the market set the demands, not people.

So I found myself talking with a colleague about all this. With both of us being ministers, we jokingly said, Well, now the CEO of Starbucks knows what it is like to work in the church. With one decision, he has made everyone unhappy and he doesn't know why. We laughed at the absurdity of the straw gate situation until my friend who is way smarter than me said, "You know, we are getting distracted from the challenge at hand with all this talk of getting rid of straws. That's just a quick fix to an even larger problem. Shouldn't we be challenging the systems which created that need for a straw in the first place? Shouldn't we be challenging the systems which destroy our earth, digging up precious land for a

limited resource, systems which pit countries against countries for the right to own this limited resource, systems which pollute our water and our land when this resource is leaked due to burst pipelines? Shouldn't we be looking at the bigger picture, working towards long term solutions rather than immediately embracing quick fixes?

In that moment, we could no longer find the humor in the situation. And in the awkward silence between us, I heard the Spirit of God say, just like it did to Moses all those years ago, "The people's bodies may be free from oppression but it will take much more to free their hearts and minds."

When we take a step back and look at this text, we realize that it is so much more than simply being about the people complaining. It is about changing the narrative. It is about God re-describing for the people, for us that this time in the wilderness is not just a dark and desolate place, that instead it can and is a place of possibilities, a place of life, a place of hope. This text is about determining if the people of God, past, present and future are really ready to live in a new and life giving way.

The thing we tend to forget as we look at this text is that God knows that the ways of Egypt, the ways where life is all broken backs, brick quotes and empty bellies, the ways of Egypt are completely inappropriate and in contrast to the ways

of the Kingdom of God. In this moment of wilderness wandering, God is giving the people, giving us a choice. Will anxiety, oppression, hoarding, greed, power, and might be the way this group of people live in community with one another or...or will the people be able to see beyond quick fixes, to come together and work towards the long term hope of freedom and wellbeing, not only for ourselves but for all of God's children as well?

I don't have all the answers to this question but if the murmurings and grumblings around Strawgate at Starbucks are any indication, we have a long way to go before any long term hope of freedom and wellbeing for all of God's people becomes a reality here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Now, I'll admit this is a pretty depressing statement on which to leave this sermon. So I will simply say, thankfully like for the people of Israel, our journey is not complete just yet. We are not there yet. We have not arrived at our final destination. We still have some miles to travel and lessons to learn.

So in the meantime, until we reach the shores of the Promised Land, in the meantime while we wait for the Kingdom of God to come as it in Heaven, in the meantime, as people of faith, may we always remember that there is another way, a way forward which leads to the freeing of all of God's children, not only just our bodies but the freeing of all our hearts and minds as well, a way which is grounded

in the promises of God, a way which is changing the narrative, re-describing this broken and hurting world into a world of possibilities and hope.

In the meantime, until we reach the shores of the Promise Land, may we learn to live and act in this way of hope as we hang in for the long haul, birthing a better world, praying for God's Kingdom to come here on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.