

Trusting God through Change
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Hymns: VT 547 – How Clear Is Our Vocation; VT 71 – Praise God (A and B, or all 3); VT 377 – New Earth, Heavens New

Exodus 16:2-15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites: ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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.

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

O give thanks to the LORD; call on his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples.

² Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.

³ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

⁴ Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.

⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles and the judgments he has uttered,

⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
³⁷Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.
³⁸Egypt was glad when they departed,
for dread of them had fallen upon it.
³⁹He spread a cloud for a covering
and fire to give light by night.
⁴⁰They asked, and he brought quails
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.
⁴¹He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
it flowed through the desert like a river.
⁴²For he remembered his holy promise
and Abraham, his servant.
⁴³So he brought his people out with joy,
his chosen ones with singing.
⁴⁴He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,
⁴⁵that they might keep his statutes
and observe his laws.
Praise the LORD!

Change is not easy. Human beings are creatures of habit. We like our routines and for things to be predictable, and we tend to get somewhat disoriented and anxious when change comes! If you've experienced a move to a new home or a new city, or gone through a major loss or transition in health, family, work/retirement – or even a change in the pastors of one's church! – you'll know this first-hand. These things can feel uncertain and overwhelming, and can take us some time to get used to and adjust. Though difficult, these are ordinary aspects of life; we all go through change like this at different times throughout our lives. More disorienting are things like pandemics, as we've seen in the past few years, or violence such as that which led to many Mennonite families immigrating from Russia/Ukraine to Canada 100 years ago, which was just commemorated this past summer. Those are much more disruptive to our hearts,

minds, and spirits, and most of us are fortunate enough not to have been through these since 100 years ago.

Our Scripture for this morning speaks very much to this theme of change. As you may have noticed from last week, the lectionary is taking us through this foundational Hebrew story of the Exodus from enslavement in Egypt – a story that comes to define who the Hebrew people are: those whom God has liberated from bondage in Egypt, the people of a God who hears and liberates the oppressed. Our two Scriptures are two examples from the Bible of circling back to these particular events, of recounting them to the people. So both of our Scriptures speak to this event – but they really couldn't be more different in how they tell the story!

The first narrative, from Exodus 16, tells the story in prose. But it certainly is not a very complimentary portrayal of the Israelites! As Patrick spoke about last week, this is part of what's called "the murmuring tradition," the tradition of complaint against God and the prophetic leaders like Moses. This story takes place about a month into their wandering in the desert, so it's reasonable to think that the supplies they brought with them from Egypt have now run out.¹ In the face of this crisis, the people begin to panic. In their despair at the worst-case-scenario of dying from hunger out here in the desert, they long for the familiar and start to doubt this whole exodus plan. 'Remember back in Egypt?' They say to each other. 'Sure, we were brutally enslaved, but at least we had all the food we could eat!' In the midst of the hurdles of change, they begin to idealize the past, probably embellishing it in their memories (since it's doubtful that the Egyptians

¹ See Anna Marsh, "Commentary on Exodus 16:2-15," *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-25/commentary-on-exodus-162-15-6>

would have fed enslaved peoples this well). They began to long for the past, to “remember fondly what it was like to be well-fed, even if they were enslaved.”²

And Moses is not happy with this turn of events. He gets offended at the people’s complaining, at their dissatisfaction, their ungratefulness! After all the wild plagues and miracles he had to do to get them out of Egypt, they dare to whine about it and say it would have been better to stay there?! That’s some nerve. He tells the people (in an “irritated” way) that it’s really God they’re complaining against, not him and Aaron. And as commentator Anna Marsh points out, we might expect God to respond similarly to Moses, with anger or even wrath. While these kinds of responses come up in other retellings of the story (see Numbers 11 or Psalm 78), this telling of these events has God responding somewhat surprisingly: where we “expect God’s wrath,” “God responds by feeding them.” “God legitimates the complaint, caring for people’s bodies” “quickly and abundantly,” and “handling the complaint with compassion.”³ The God who heard their cries of suffering in Egypt is again one who hears their complaints in the midst of this radical change in their lives. And in response, God offers them the comforts of quail and manna bread to sustain them as they continue their journey into the unknown.

Our second Scripture passage tells of the same events, but with a decidedly different tone! Psalm 105 is not a psalm of complaint (and there are plenty of those), but a psalm of praise. The people are told to “remember the wonderful works [God] has done,” that God “brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled. Egypt was glad when they departed, for dread of them had

² Anna Marsh, “Commentary.”

³ Anna Marsh, “Commentary.”

fallen upon it.” There is no second-guessing the exodus in this version of the narrative! This is unequivocally presented as a very good thing, as something for which God is to be praised with much rejoicing. And God’s acts of sustaining them once they have left Egypt are also recounted here: “[God] spread a cloud for a covering and fire to give light by night. They asked, and [God] brought quails and gave them food from heaven in abundance. [God] opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.” The exodus and God’s abundant provision in the wilderness are here declared to be fulfillments of God’s promises to Abraham, of making them a people and leading them into new possibilities. What a contrast to the uncertain, complaining people of Exodus 16! In a sense, those people, unsure about what lay ahead, were resisting change, whereas in the Psalm, the people have come through to the other side of the experience. They can now look back and recognize that it was a change for the better, that God was leading them to a better life – at least until the next major change!

If I look back to how we navigated the Covid pandemic as a congregation, some of the Israelites’ reactions make a lot of sense. It’s difficult to see our way through when we’re in the thick of a major change or crisis. What’s remarkable is that the Bible gives us space to voice those doubts, laments, and uncertainties, as the Exodus passage and many of the psalms exemplify. Walter Brueggemann talks about the importance of these kinds of passages in naming the truth of our experience, stating, “Much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness. As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience.... The hope [at

the centre of our faith] is rooted precisely in the midst of loss and darkness, where God is surprisingly present.”⁴

As we contemplate a major change in our congregation with my stepping down next February, I know that it’s difficult. It is for me as well! This particular change can seem daunting and that we aren’t sure what’s going to meet us on the other side. There is of course sadness in saying goodbye in this way. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we don’t want to change, so we resist it! And yet, as Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler reminds us, we Mennonites believe in the priesthood of ALL believers! As pastors, we work hard, but we know we’re not irreplaceable. “It is strange to be a priest among priests,” Florer-Bixler writes, reminding us,

For centuries, Mennonite pastors were chosen by lot or election from within their community. They pastored for a season before returning to other labors. More often than not, these men tacked the responsibilities of preaching and accountability onto their work of farming or carpentry or smelting. Early Anabaptists derived this practice from Acts, where the inner circle of Jesus’ followers is replenished after the betrayal of Judas.

There’s an old story that in the 16th century, Anabaptists chose the least essential person in the community as their pastor. That way, when persecution came and the pastor was inevitably killed, the community wouldn’t lose an essential service like a cobbler or a mason.

So she concludes that even without her, her Mennonite church in North Carolina “has all the gifts it needs to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, to love one another and the world, to be the body of Jesus.”⁵ Patrick said something similar at one of our meetings recently when we were checking in with each other: “I’m going to be okay and the congregation is going to be okay.” We may not know what lies ahead yet for this congregation, but we can already begin to dream of what new possibilities God has in

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), xii.

⁵ Melissa Florer-Bixler, “As a Pastor, It’s My Job to Pay Attention,” *The Christian Century* (Sept. 2023): <https://www.christiancentury.org/column/voices/pastor-it-s-my-job-pay-attention>

store for us. I wonder: what we will look back on with much rejoicing and praise in this time in which we opened ourselves up to change? In this sense, the new verses to the familiar hymn "Praise God" (VT 71), which we'll sing at the end of our service today, can be a kind of metaphor, allowing for new variations on a comforting and grounding melody. Whatever happens, our Scripture passages encourage us to trust in God's constant presence, in God's compassionate and generous provision of that which we need to nourish us. And in the face of it all, there is space for us to hold complaint and gratitude together as we continue on this sometimes meandering journey of faith. AMEN