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Moses & His People & Their God The Promise Continues V. "What Is It?"

From Exodus 16:2-4, 13-20a NRSV The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The 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 fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then 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... 13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 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. 16 This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" 17 The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. 18 But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. 19 And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." 20 But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul.

There's an old joke that I have heard in various forms that goes like this: "Why are church fights sometimes so mean?" Answer: "Well, because the stakes are so small." Now, while we may laugh, we also wince, don't we? Because the joke is both wrong and right. It is wrong in the sense that when we are at our best, we know that the church does in fact represent not just a motley collection of individuals each with their own preferences and foibles, but is to be the very Body of Christ on earth, entrusted with the most important message of any message that there is: that a God of unconditional grace and love and justice reigns in this world, and not all those other things that try to seductively claim one's ultimate loyalty, and that that God has a purpose for each life and a promise for each life. That's hardly small stakes!

But the joke is also right in the sense that sometimes the church does find itself

grumbling and griping, feuding and fractious, over things that ought not occasion such ire. It reminds me of those arguments in marriages or even between the best of friends where you are all of a sudden in the midst of a pretty nasty or heated exchange and what occasioned the fighting was – you realize when you're able to look back on it more calmly – actually something small and not really that significant.

How does that happen, whether in a marriage, or a friendship, or in relations with your children or parents – or in a church? How does grumbling and grouching arise, what causes it? How do the normal itches and irritants of life suddenly take on a huge presence that causes folks to say things they may not mean or do things that they will look back on and wish they hadn't? Well, I'm going to posit and answer here and it is this: often such grumbling and grouching, such fractiousness and fighting, comes directly from our **anxiety**. To explore that, though, let's return to our Hebrew brothers and sisters whom we have been following for five weeks now as they are now camped in the middle of the Sinai peninsula having escaped, made their exodus, from the evils of Egypt.

The first thing to be said is this: they had reason for their anxiety. Loads and loads of reasons! Because think about it: they didn't know where they were going, didn't know what it was going to be like when they got there (wherever it was), they had fled for their lives with only what they could carry, and they literally didn't know where their meals were coming from tomorrow. So how **were** they feeling? Not good. Anxious! And in their anxiety, what did they do? They griped, they grumbled. Those opening lines of today's scripture could hardly be any more poignant – and Eugene Peterson's translation conveys that poignancy and the Hebrew people's anxiety and anger with even more eloquence: *"Why didn't God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!"*

Now, whatever our ages or stations or circumstances in life, each and every one of us has had and will likely have again those moments in which we too feel poised between past and future – and that can make us anxious and uncertain. For life itself is, to use an overused metaphor, a journey and you and I will sometimes move through that journey smoothly, and sometimes we will have those moments when it seems we are trapped between something that didn't work – and yet whose familiarity we may nonetheless long for – and something we don't know the shape of which, don't know the goal, don't know what the next bend will bring. And what do we do in those moments? Well, on the one hand, as with the Hebrew people, we may **idealize** what was, forgetting the ways that old routines and old habits didn't really work but pretending in rose-tinted memory that they did. For the Hebrew people, what loomed large in their memory on that particular day in Sinai that our scripture describes was the fact that they had been fed each day. But what they had forgotten, or were in denial about, was the horrors of their existence as slaves whose boy babies were killed, whose women were brutalized, and whose men were worked to death. And even the remembered food of Egypt is actually mis-remembered – for the Egyptians had put them on starvation diets the more quickly to work them to death. But even with all that, still the Hebrew people were grumbling, they were complaining, they were wishing for an Egypt that they had just fled – but they were depicting it in a way that it never really was.

Pastor Roberta Hesthenes says this about the grumbling and the griping that the Hebrew people were doing, that longing for their now-idealized but mis-remembered past:

The habit of grumbling is one that can infect the soul. It falsifies the past. When you look at what Israel did when she grumbled,... she falsified the past by saying,

“There in Egypt, we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted.” But it wasn't true.

And she goes on to point out the problem with such grumbling, and it's a **theological** problem – not in an abstract or academic sense, but in the sense that grumbling and griping and longing for an idealized-but-not-really-real past can hurt the way we think about God. Hear her as she continues:

Sometimes we are tempted to live in the past and think that those good old days were better than anything that is going on now or anything that might come in the future. [But such] Grumbling... teaches us to distrust God. It is a denial that God is good and that God means good for us, that even in difficult and hard circumstances.... ***Grumbling denies the goodness of God.***¹

Grumbling denies the goodness of God. Grumbling and seeking to hold on to an idealized-but-not-really-real past makes us less able to deal with the here and now. Whether it's in church, or in our own personal lives, or our relationships, such idealizing WILL trap you, and WILL embitter you, and WILL make you far less able to know the God who would call you out of bondage and into freedom in the here and the now. I suspect we have all known a person – or maybe we have even been tempted sometimes to **be** that person – who longingly remembered some distant earlier time in his or her life as the high point of that life, and who thinks everything has been downhill from there. Do you know such folks? Have you ever been tempted to **be** that person? I have, I would confess. For in the midst of a sometimes scary, always complex life, it can be quite seductive to focus not on what God might be calling me to do now, but on what a good deal it was sometime “back then” – forgetting that “back then” had its own hurts, its own problems, its own anxieties.

¹http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hestenes_3629.htm Emphasis mine.

But maybe that temptation to hold on to an idealized **past** in the face of an anxious future is not your temptation. Maybe *your* temptation lies at the other end of things: wanting to control the **future**. Maybe you have those moments when, like me, you want it all laid out, you want it predictable, you want it to be as you would direct. You want to be in charge of your future. You want certainty. I've told you before about our daughter who, when she was young, almost always had the same first words come out of mouth when she got home from school was "What's for dinner tonight?" She wanted to know, right then. For sure. With complete clarity and completeness. Now. And when Barbara or I would answer, "*I don't know yet,*" she would be very anxious and would ask the question a dozen more times. It was both amusing and occasionally annoying. But, I would have to confess, that my annoyance was sometimes the annoyance of self-recognition – because I too would like to know what's in store, how it will turn out, how everything will play out. I want to know it now. For sure. Clearly and completely.

As you likely know, a human infant has a number of reflexes that he or she loses later on. Tickle a nursing infant's cheek and she or he will instinctually try to see if the source of that tickling is in fact food. Or, to take another example, if you're an adult, and someone were to play a mean trick on you and put something painful in your open palm, your adult reflex is to open that hand more widely and fling the painful thing away. But infants have a different reflex. No matter what is put into their palms, they grab it and hold on. Now, this was probably a reflex that evolved over the eons, in the dim distant human past, which proved to be a help when nursing. And whether the food is from mamma or a handful of yummy smushed-up peas, the infant's inclination and reflex is to grab it and not let go, and it is an ability, a reflex, that helps them get fed. But it's not so good of a trait in an adult. And yet there are times that every one of us wants, indeed, to grab and hold on, to control what will happen, to be unwilling to face

the future with open hands but instead to face the future with closed, controlling clenched hands.

But the problem is this: when your hands are closed tight, when they are clenched, nobody can put anything in them. You can't receive anything. God can't do much to feed you and lead you to new ways of freedom because you are so intent on holding on and controlling that you can't receive anything. You trade away new possibilities for the illusion of control – because that is what it is, as seductive as it sometimes indeed is: an illusion. This is where I love God's sense of humor, because, to return our story, look at God's response to the people's rose-colored complaint that they had had enough to eat in Egypt but now they were going to die of hunger in the wilderness. How does God respond to this grumble? God sends them manna. But notice what the people's very first respond to this miraculous feeding was: "*When Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?!?'*" (Our daughter would have hated this!) In other words, God indeed fed them – but not in the way of either their idealized but mis-remembered fleshpot past in Egypt, or their desire to control the future. In fact, the nature of this manna makes the point that we human beings simply cannot control the future, much as we might try, much as we might grab hold of something and not let it go. For did you hear in the story that each day's manna had a shelf life of exactly one single day. Those who tried to keep it overnight found that the next morning it had grown rotten and wormy. Those who tried to clench their hands and hoard it under the secret belief that they knew better how to provide for the future than God, found that it could not be saved or stored, it could not be made into manna jerky. It was food for that day only. But that was enough. That was enough.

The Hebrew people, there at their first crisis on their long journey out of Egypt, hold up a mirror to us, don't they? For their temptation – and ours – in times of anxiety

and stress and change is indeed often to either hold on to the past, idealizing the way things used to be, donning the rose-colored glasses OR to seek to control the future, to grab it and try to force it to be a certain way, force it to conform to our will. The problem with either way of approaching life in times of anxiety and change is that both deny that it is God who is in charge, doing everything that God can, as I have put it in the last two sermons, to feed us and free us. Now, we sometimes may not recognize the way God is seeking to feed us for our journeys, we too may say “what is it”? And, likewise, we may not recognize the new paths, the freeing paths, that God is opening through the wilderness because we have grabbed hold of what we think that the future “has to be” like, and we have a map on which **we** have drawn the route.

My friends, let us be resolved not to be fearful of the way forward that God is calling us to go. Let us not be anxious in the face of the new ways that God is offering to feed us and nourish us for the journey. Let us honor the past without it ever trapping or deluding us, and let us face the future not with hands clenched, but open to receive whatever “what is it” that God will surely provide. Because, when all is said and done, the stakes ARE not small, not small at all. And God will surely provide. That we know. That we trust. And that is what gives us life. Amen.