

Exodus 17:1-13

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

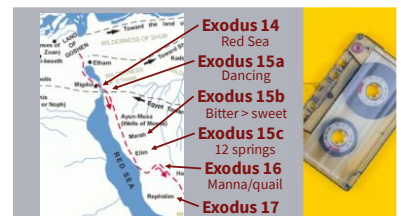
⁸ Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." ¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹² But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. ¹³ And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

Today we begin a new worship series titled “The Enemies of Gratitude.” This series focuses on the things that can prevent us from seeing all of God’s blessings in our lives. When we fall into thinking about how things could be or used to be better, when worry becomes our primary focus, when we fuss about things that we think we deserve, when we get too focused on what we have (or don’t have), when we get caught up in the ways that life’s struggles keep getting us down – then we can fail to see God’s Spirit in our lives and at work in our midst. Instead of being stuck in these places of discontent, we will be encouraged to live with an “attitude of gratitude.” We will be invited to move forward in faith and trust in what God has done, is doing, and will do.

Today we begin with “Nostalgia” – one of the primary killers of moving forward in faith and trust. As we prepare to wrestle with this giant today, let us pray...



As we get going, let’s begin by setting the stage for today’s passage. Just days before today’s grumbling, thousands upon thousands of people are delivered from certain death as God makes a way through the Red Sea. God heard their prayers and cries and makes a way forward. In Exodus 14 God parts the waters, giving them a path to freedom. Exodus 15 begins with God’s people dancing in the desert. For three days they dance and celebrate and offer thanks to God. For three days – now that’s gratitude! From there the Israelites travel for 3 days, arriving at Marah, where the water is bitter and undrinkable. They cry out to God and through Moses God makes the water sweet. They travel again and come to Elim, where they find 12 springs of good water. Then the Israelites set out again, into the desert of sin. In chapter 16 the people are hungry, and the crying out turns to grumbling.

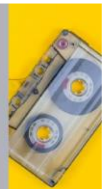


They longed for the good old days, for the days *“when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.”* They wonder if Moses (and God) brought them out of Egypt just to kill them in the desert. They get nostalgic about the days when they were slaves. This is one sign that they had lost their faith in God and in Moses. They were idolizing the past and the past involved being a slave. They thought something like, “Back in the good old days, when we spent all day making bricks and building pyramids, when we had no rights, when Pharaoh occasionally killed all of our baby boys – oh, those were the days!” And God responds by providing manna in the morning and quail at night. Once again, God provided.

Turning to today’s passage, Exodus 17, we see that the Israelites have traveled on to Rephidim. In verse 1 we learn that there is no water there. Reading on we see that the people quarreled with Moses, saying, *“Give us water to drink.”* They have moved on from crying out to God, to grumbling, now to quarreling. This is NOT a positive progression. They are quarreling with Moses, and they are testing God. Their complaint rises to this, echoing the complaint from the desert of sin, saying, *“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”* Moses, being very human, throws up his hands and asks God what to do with this people!

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

- Exodus 17:3



We can do this in our lives. It might not be Egypt, but we have our times and places when we question or doubt or even mistrust God. When we have been brought through to the other side of a sin, we can look back on the good old days. I think this happens in two situations.

Nostalgia



Once is when we are yet immature in our faith, and we miss what once was. We miss that circle of friends that we used to hang out with or that activity that we used to really enjoy. We can get a bit nostalgic in this woe-is-me place. We are trying to figure out this whole Christian thing – like the Israelites were trying to do with their faith in the desert. The other situation where we struggle is much like theirs too. We get to a hard spot – one where we are hungry. It might be for food. Or it might be for power or a new possession. We hunger for something we cannot have, and we grumble against God. We might even feel like we might die without that thing.

For the Israelites, every day in slavery was the same. Yes, there was suffering. But it was predictable. There was some comfort in that. Freedom was much more trying for the people of God. In the wilderness they had to depend on God. They were in uncharted territory. There was no predictability. They woke up every day wondering if they were traveling or staying put. They woke up wondering where they might lay their heads down that night. They had to trust where God was leading them. They had to trust that water and manna and quail would be there every day.

We experience these struggles too. For example, stepping away from teaching and into ministry, there was definitely a feeling of uncertainty and discomfort. Each of us experiences these things when moving on to something new. Similarly, for those moving past an addiction, the future is certainly unknown and full of questions. There are many other situations when we must trust God with the way forward. Each time we must decide that we can trust that God will provide. Mike shared a personal story last Sunday that illustrated this. He shared the story of losing his job at the dairy.

In the midst of that turmoil, though, Mike felt a strange peace. He trusted in the Holy Spirit's guidance and in the fact that God had always provided for him and his family. In this hard place, Mike turned to God and to his faith. This led Mike to pray for his boss, John, who had the unenviable task of letting go 50% of the sales team. As life moved along, Mike saw God's plan unfolding and, ultimately, experienced God's provision as the company hired him back. Mike shared a wonderful truth from his experience: God wants to hear from us. It is an opportunity for God to bless us and for God to answer in a way that is best for us and for our life. Connecting to God is the number one antidote for the disease of nostalgia.

In Exodus 17, Moses turns to God, yes, in frustration. That's OK. God wants us as we are. God instructs Moses to gather the elders and to lead them out to the rock at Horeb. There Moses is to strike the rock with his staff. Doing so, water pours forth from the rock in the desert. With their quarreling, the people had asked, *"Is the Lord among us or not?"* The water in the desert was God's first 'Yes!' And instead of leaving the Israelites trapped in the spiritual land of testing and finding fault, God continues to lead and guide and provide. God meets their need and the Israelites drink from the rock.

Right after this miracle, an enemy comes and attacks Israel. Joshua is sent out to lead them in battle and Moses, Aaron, and Hur head up the mountain to oversee the battle. Moses holds up the staff and the tide turns Israel's way. But Moses grows tired as the battle rages on. God instructs Aaron and Hur to assist Moses. With their help, the staff is held up and Joshua leads Israel to victory. At times we too need others to help us, to come along side of us so that they can help us on those days when the struggle is real.

Walking with others is another great antidote to nostalgia. Nostalgia never leads you forward because it casts an impossible standard. Nostalgia sets a candy-colored, much-improved, or even ideal rendering of what once was. For the Israelites, it was Egypt 2.0 – except with the warts and thorns and suffering and slavery removed. Nostalgia left Israel stuck in the quicksand of edited memories, causing them to be perpetually ungrateful for the provision of God that they experienced in their times of need.

The negative impacts of being nostalgic still affects God's people today. We can hold onto an image of what was – the church of our youth, the heyday of Sunday school, the era when everyone was in church every Sunday. For others, this can lead us to “shop” or to “church hop” – to use a common term. On Monday morning Phyllis talked about this during our staff devotional time. The topic was “Dragging Egypt,” and it drew upon this very idea of longing for days gone by, days when life seemed better. She made the observation that sometimes people get unhappy at a church, so they decide to try somewhere else. Phyllis said that she's seen people come to Grace for a while and then they move onto someplace else. They are trying to find that elusive ideal church, one they have often conjured up in their minds.

We do this in our lives too. We cling to a season in our life in which things were better – health, income, relationships. We long for the days when life was “better.” In both of these instances, nostalgia steals our joy and makes us indifferent to the ways that God is at work in our lives and in our church. Our indifference can even rise to the level of disdain for new ideas and thoughts that might make today or tomorrow better than yester-year. When this happens, we get stuck in our faith and we lose hope.

Here's the thing: we won't get too far in our discipleship journey on enthusiasm alone. There will be times when we've hit a dry spell, or when we find ourselves in a desert. In those places, grumbling and fear will be ever around us and even within us at times. In life, enthusiasm wanes and emotions come and go. So it takes discipline to sustain the pace as we walk our faith journey. It takes commitment and the will to keep putting one foot in front of another. This is not easy to do on our own.

We will not get far when we are trying to move forward on our own. But here's another thing: we are not alone as we continue along our discipleship path. First of all, there is the ever-present Spirit of God who sustains and enlivens us the more we seek God in our daily lives, as we proceed on the long journey of faith. God is with us. That was one of the lessons that Mike shared last week, right? God walked with him and showed him the way, restoring him to full time employment in the end.

Secondly, there is a community of faith that encourages us, mentors us, learns with us and even from us at times, just as we learn from them at times. Indeed, we might argue that the only way we can make it for the long haul of faith is to take the journey together. There's a saying that sums it up: "if you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together." We need to be in community as we journey forward in faith. That is a lesson that we learn again and again as we work and grow together.

In this week's chapter from [The Jordan River Rules](#) author Robert Morgan connects our need for God with our need for community. At the start of chapter 3 he lists many examples of people who connected with God for a period of time before moving forward – Joseph, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, Jesus, Saul.



Each took time to seek God's direction with a big decision or major stage in life. Morgan encourages us to pause to pray, ponder, worship, and rest. Our group on Wednesday morning added another step: seeking wisdom and input from those you trust. These steps usually lead us to good decisions and wise movement forward. These steps empower us to move into that moment in alignment with God's will and ways. These steps help us avoid inaction and they guard our hearts against nostalgia.



When Israel first stalled out at the entrance to the Promised Land, 20 years ago, they did not pause to seek God. They doubted and that generation of exodus wanderers never reaches the Promised Land. Their lack of faith would not let them get there. If we stay stuck in the past and the “good old days,” we too lack faith. There we will never move forward. Liberation from what was and hope for the future lie in wait for those who can walk forward in faith, trusting in God to establish and lead us into the future.

Last Sunday, in about the middle of his message, Mike shared that when Jesus looks at us, he sees some who will be first and some who will be last. He sees some who are rich and some who are poor. None of that matters to Jesus or to God. He noted that the Lord desires for us to have a willing heart, that the Lord expects our best effort, and that the Lord is looking for us to have a servant's attitude and heart. I would add that the Lord expects us to trust in the good plans that are in store for those who believe in the Lord. Six of us attended “Imagine Day” this past Saturday. It was all about what is termed “Fresh Expressions” of faith. Almost all of these expressions center on taking our faith outside the walls of the church and into places where people gather naturally and organically. This is not how we have “done church” in the past.

We've too long held onto a "let them come to us" mentality. My friends, by and large, they're not coming. If we stay there, in that old way of being the church, our future is not good.

In verse 17 of today's passage, the people ask the question: "*Is the Lord among us or not?*" This verse was the crux of the grumbling and quarreling in the wilderness. This too is the verse that defines whether we stay stuck in the nostalgia of the past or if we move forward into God's preferred future for our lives and for our church. It is my hope and prayer that as people of God and as a church, we seek to find ways to engage the world and the people around us, letting them know that, yes, the Lord is among us. May it be so for you and for me and for our church. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider your past, what do you long for or wish was still here? How does this keep you from moving forward in a positive direction?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that is struggling because they are stuck in the past. Spend some time in prayer for this person or group this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 12:22-34. What worries do you carry? How do these words of Jesus help you to maybe lay down some of these worries?