

I sure do miss the good old days here at Triune, when the sanctuary was full and we could sing hymns, and then crowd into the dining hall for a hot lunch together; we could even shake hands with each other! I sure do miss the good old days when the Art Room was bustling with activity, when relationships of support were nurtured in Round Table and Circles, when AA and NA could meet in person for healing and encouragement, when we could study the Bible together in the same room with each other. Oh my goodness... the good old days.

Thousands of years ago, the Hebrew people also said, although in different words, “We sure do miss the good old days...” They even composed Joni Mitchell’s lyrics for her: “We don’t know what we’ve got till it’s gone”. We hear this in our text this morning, in a story that takes place after God has rescued them spectacularly from slavery in Egypt, and then parted the Red Sea for them to walk through on dry ground to escape from Pharaoh’s army. Once they are safely on the other side of the Red Sea, the people are ecstatic: for three days they sing and dance and praise God with excitement and gratitude and joy. But within a very short time, the reality of life in the desert sets in; life in the wilderness is a jolt! They get thirsty, and look around in vain for water; they get hungry, and begin to reminisce about the food they ate in Egypt.

So, our text this morning is from Exodus 17: 1-7:

*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. <sup>2</sup>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?” <sup>3</sup>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?” <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”*

And a companion text is from Numbers 11: 4-6; this text takes place after they cried out to God for something to eat, and after God responded by providing manna each day:

*The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! <sup>5</sup>We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; <sup>6</sup>but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”*

Really now?! They're longing for the "good old days" in Egypt, when they had melons to eat? They must have had on some pretty powerful rose-colored glasses - to be longing for the "good old days", when they were slaves! Actually, the lenses on their rose-colored glasses must've been more like those mirrors at the fun house, that distort your vision beyond recognition. Here they are, remembering one good thing about the past, and overlooking all the horrors of those days. Now that's some nostalgia! Feeling wistful for the days, and years, and centuries, of slavery!

I wonder if we are ever like these people from thousands of years ago? It seems preposterous that we would be so blind... and yet I wonder... Might we ever long for the good old days, and conveniently forget the struggles and challenges of those days? Might we ever idealize the past, in a way that makes it truly unrecognizable? Might we ever see the past as a "simpler time", when life was less complicated, less stressful, less tough? Sometimes when I look at a Norman Rockwell painting, I get the feeling that he has handed me rose-colored glasses.

Right now in our country, there is a strong articulation of nostalgia, an intense longing for the "good old days" when America was great. Maybe we think of the 1950s as the "good old days": there was widespread, growing economic prosperity in those days, and churches were full in those days. We tend to think of the 1950s as "Happy Days", like the tv show from the 1970s, with Fonzi and sock hops and summer nights. But the decade of the 1950s was when the Cold War was center stage, with school children terrorized by their classroom drills of what to do in case of a nuclear attack. And in the 1950s, Jim Crow was alive and well, denying basic civil rights to African-Americans, who could not vote, eat at a lunch counter, enter the public library, or select a seat on the bus; in the 1950s, sharecropping was still common, schools were separate and dramatically unequal, and US government policy instituted redlining, marking neighborhoods on a map with red ink that black people could not live in. So were the 1950s really the good old days?

In the early 2000s, I was at a meeting of preachers and other church leaders, and one person stood up to talk about the importance of biblical literacy. He talked about how we church leaders weren't doing our jobs, because so many people in our churches didn't know their basic Bible stories. And he cited a reference from one regional church history account, from the Low Country of SC in the 1920s, showing that those people really knew their Bibles! I was impressed, and started thinking about how to do a better job of teaching my congregation Bible stories. But then the person sitting next to me in this meeting whispered to me, "He's forgetting that the Low Country in the 1920s also had a high incidence of lynchings. Those white Christians may have known their Bible stories, but they weren't living out the Golden Rule of loving their neighbors." Hmmm. That speaker had on some rose-colored glasses - selecting one piece of the past to idealize, and overlooking the other brutal realities of those days. No, I take that back: his glasses were not simply rose-colored — they had lenses like a fun-house mirror.

The problem with nostalgia is not only that we revise the past beyond recognition, like the Hebrew people longing for the food they ate when they were slaves in Egypt. The problem with nostalgia is that it can be "all too easy to get stuck in the quicksand of our edited memories, and end up perpetually ungrateful for the present, which of course can never match an idealized past." (Brian Erickson) Nostalgia can quietly steal our joy and blind us to the blessings and gifts of today.

This was a primary lesson the Hebrew people had to learn in the desert: that God would provide for their needs each day. God sent manna and quail to them to eat, and provided streams of water, yes, even in the desert. But they were almost blind to the constant provision of God because they were trapped in their rosy revisions of the past. How might we too not notice the constant provision of God? How might we too be oblivious to the flowing streams of living water God has provided for us?

To be sure, the days we are living in right now are tough. The pandemic has brought economic crisis on top of health crisis: it can be overwhelming to keep a job, find a job, find housing, avoid eviction, access health care, try to maintain sobriety. And in these tough pandemic days, racial injustice is becoming more and more apparent, revealing that we have much hard work to do as a nation to live up to our words of "justice for all". And if all this is not enough, these are also days of political polarization and partisan distortions of reality. And the climate crisis is bearing down on us with fury. These days are tough; these days are filled with grief and loss, fear, oppression, and very real dangers. It can be oh-so-tempting for us to long for the "good old days".

In the midst of the very real struggles and heartaches and challenges today, these stories from the Old Testament show us God's faithfulness to the people in the past, and that can give us the assurance that God is faithful to us in the present, and the confident hope that God will continue to be faithful to us in the future. Our faith tells us that God is with us, regardless of the circumstances; our faith tells us that God provides gifts that sustain us and get us through the day.

We hear this wisdom in one of the slogans of AA and NA: "one day at a time". We can live our lives only one day at a time; God's grace is sufficient for one day at a time. God gave one day's supply of manna to the Hebrew people in the desert, but *only* one day's worth. At first, they couldn't recognize God's provision, because it was so different than what they had expected.

Likewise, we too can have trouble recognizing God's provision, because it's different than what we expected. So it's worth asking: what glimpses do we get of God's presence in our midst? What gifts has God given us this day - gifts that may well be different than the gifts of yesterday or the gifts of tomorrow?

Some years ago, I started keeping a gratitude journal. Each night before I turn out the light, I write down 5 bullet points of something to be grateful for this day. Sometimes it's something big, but it doesn't have to be: it may be seeing a beautiful sunset or a heron in flight or the moon on a clear night; it may be eating a crisp apple or reading a hopeful article or taking a nap or having a conversation that lifted my spirits. Often I'm surprised to remember something from early in the day, that I had already forgotten about. Now I'll admit that sometimes the day has been so tough that it's hard to think of something, so on those days, I simply write that I'm grateful that "the day is over" and that "tomorrow will be another day." Regardless of the contents of my bullet points, this practice helps me pay attention, and notice things that I could easily overlook. Over time, this practice has shaped my inner life in ways that are unmistakable: I can keep a little better perspective on things, and I experience more gratitude, and more peace, simply by naming the gifts of the day. The reality is: even in best of times, I can find something to worry about; even in worst of times, there is almost always something

that can give us a glimpse of God's presence in our midst, there is almost always some reminder, no matter how small, of God's goodness and faithfulness, there is almost always some glimmer of light shining in the darkness.

Being attentive to the presence and love of God, and being grounded in gratitude, rather than pining away for the past, can give us the stability and the courage to look beyond ourselves, and to engage in the world in ways that work for the common good, so that all people may thrive.

So I want to close with some questions:

How is God equipping us this day to meet the challenges we face?

How might God be preparing us for the future, which will also hold plenty of challenges, some new some "leftover"?

How is God opening our eyes to see new ways to live lives of faithfulness and service to God?

How is God leading us to love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves?

How is God working in our midst this day in ways that are mighty and mysterious and wondrous?

*Thanks be to God, for God's presence in our lives. Amen.*