

Today we begin a new four-week sermon series entitled: “The Enemies of Gratitude.” During the time together we’re given an opportunity to practice gratitude by calling out the things that often keep us from being truly grateful. Each text will reveal a misplaced focus that prevents us from seeing all the blessings that are right in front of us. The need for “an attitude of gratitude” is made clear in each week’s Scripture passage. Today’s misplaced focus is nostalgia. Nostalgia, as defined in the Cambridge dictionary, is *a bittersweet feeling of happiness and slight sadness when remembering a person, place, or time from the past*. Nostalgia isn’t always a bad thing; however, nostalgia often sugar coats the past and thus, rarely leads you forward because it casts an impossible standard. I remember when my brother, sister, and I would complain about one another and kids at school, he would have to chime in and say something like, “When I was in school, everyone always got along and no one ever acted out. You kids need to learn to get along!” I’m 100% certain that wasn’t true, but he thought it was. Ahhh...the glory days...the good ole days...that’s the story my dad told himself when faced with our present-day laments and conflict. Today’s text is found in the Book of Exodus. Some of us are familiar with the story of these migrating refugees: Slavery in Egypt → God appoints Moses to go to Pharaoh and request to let God’s people go → Pharaoh said no so God sent ten plagues → the last one being the worst- killing of the first born sons- so in order to protect the Israelites, they painted their doorpost with animal’s blood- Called Passover because the angel of death passed over their house → Moses’ raised his staff and God provided their freedom through the parting of the Red Sea → They celebrated for a

while → but then things got uncomfortable in the wilderness., and they forgot what all God has done for them even when there were signs of divine activity all around them. Today's text finds us in the third wilderness story where the Israelites find themselves without basic necessities to live: water, food, and then water again. Before we turn to God's Word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

The Israelites are parched. I wonder if they're beginning to see mirages of water fountains in the wilderness. We're told that the "whole congregation" journeyed by stages from one section of the wilderness to another. No available water means a bunch of anxious, unhappy and tired people. Can you blame them? They were doing what God has commanded of them and now they felt that God had left them out to dry- literally. There is no water to drink, and the people aren't so patient. It seems as though "wilderness is no longer simply a place, but it is, for Israel, a state of mind with an uncertain future" (Terence Fretheim, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). They go to Moses and demand water to drink for survival. Moses returns their demand with questions about why they are arguing with him and testing God. They sound angry but underneath, I wonder if they were afraid?! Their question of why Moses and God brought them out of Egypt if they were just going to die in the wilderness- makes me, an outside observer, wonder if they've lost their minds and perhaps they have. One sign: When you start to idealize your past, and your past involved being a slave to the Egyptian Pharaoh. Sometimes the wilderness makes us rewrite the past. When the present becomes difficult, we can begin saying, "Things used to be better. We

didn't have these problems back then. Maybe we were better off before?" Every generation does it. We remember: simpler times, better communities, churches, neighbors, music, families, politics, manners, etc. Memory has a way of removing the uncomfortable parts. The danger isn't remembering the past; the danger is allowing memory to become a false witness. The glory days weren't as glory-filled as we remember them. The Israelites' challenge isn't that they remember Egypt; it's that they remember Egypt without Pharaoh. In slavery, every day was the same for the Israelites. There is something comfortable about suffering, because it is predictable. Freedom can be much more trying. Out here in the wilderness, when they have to depend upon God, when they are in uncharted territory, there is no predictability. They wake up every day having to trust that God is going to lead them somewhere" (Brian Erickson, *A Preacher's Guild to a Lectionary Sermon Series*). Nostalgia says: "Take me back." Faith says: "Lead us forward." Nostalgia says: "I remember what I had." Gratitude says: "I remember who God is." Nostalgia says: "The past was better." Gratitude says: "God is still at work." Do you hear the difference? It's hard to hear much less remember God's faithfulness when you're in the thick of it. It's easy to lose hope, and it's hard to trust in God's continual care. Here- in today's text- the Israelites' anxieties are beyond high. For the first time in the wilderness narratives, they hold both Moses and God accountable. Moses tries to negotiate with the people but that doesn't work. Afraid for his life, Moses, cries out to God for help. "The Israelites, trapped in rosy revisions of their past, are blinded to the almost constant provision of God" (Erickson). They are numbed to the now, trapped in the spiritual

lands of Massah, meaning “test” and Meribah, meaning “find fault.” One scholar put it in this way: they are trapped between “Testingville” and “Complainingburg” (Victor Hamilton, *Exodus*). I don’t know about you, but I’ve been trapped there too. Israel stands in the already but not yet. They stand between **what God has delivered them from** and **where God is leading them**. This is where nostalgia becomes dangerous because when the wilderness gets hard, Egypt begins looking attractive.

God doesn’t seem to take offense at their request. Instead, God responds and sends Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, where God said God would be standing. Interesting because Horeb is also the place where Moses first encountered God’s power in the burning bush (Ex. 3). It’s also interesting because the Apostle Paul will later associate this rock with Jesus (1 Cor. 10:4). God knew that the Israelites had a history of not trusting and forgetting, so God had Moses bring a few elders to witness. And the inclusion of Moses’ staff is a significant detail. God had Moses strike the rock not just with any rod BUT with the same rod that Moses’ brother, Aaron, used to throw down in front of Pharaoh- the rod that became a snake. The same rod that Aaron used to turn the Nile into blood- the first plague leading to the Passover and eventually to the freedom of the Israelites from slavery. The same rod that was used to make the Nile undrinkable is now used to provide drinking water for the parched Israelites. The same God who has provided for them before, provides for them again- water from a rock- in the middle of the wilderness. It’s easy for us- reading from afar- to see the pattern. It’s easy to say yet it’s very hard to live out, especially when you’re in the

wilderness of losing your insurance or healthcare or housing or job or relationships. And yet the Gospel tells us not to confuse familiarity with faithfulness. We may be in the wilderness. We may be genuinely thirsty. But God is faithful. A rock is the last place we'd think water could come from in a desert. But God can do all things! We may not understand why God has brought us here. But we can't allow the difficulty of the day or season to convince us that slavery is better than freedom. Don't let today's scarcity to erase yesterday's grace. We cannot permit nostalgia to convince us that God's best work is behind us. The God who was faithful in Egypt is the God who is faithful in the wilderness- and the God who be faithful in whatever the future holds. Nostalgia says: "Take us back to the glory days." Gratitude says: "Awake our souls to remember what God has done." Faith says: "Trust God with what comes next."

Gratitude requires remembering the whole story, and the Israelites and we have a memory problem. They and we allow today's absence to erase yesterday's abundance. They ask, "Is the Lord among us or not" (v. 7)? I've asked this question at one point another along my journey in life. Haven't you? This is a legitimate question for a challenging time and yet how quickly we all forget the many times and ways that God provides daily, sufficient grace. How quickly we fail to trust God. "The Israelites wander in their grumbling, and it should be no surprise that they go in circles for forty years. This forgetfulness still strikes God's people leading some faithful Christ followers to remember earlier days through a Norman Rockwell revisionist lens. Whether it is holding on to the church of our youth (which ceased to exist many years ago) or

clinging to a season of our own lives in which things were better than they are now, nostalgia quietly steals our joy and makes us indifferent to the flowing streams of living water God has provided here in the wilderness” (Erickson).

Going through old emails the other day, I came across a headline in the Post & Courier from March 15<sup>th</sup> of this year. It caught my eye. The title? “Your death will be ideal’: The outrageous life and artful exit of Molly Pratt” ([link](#)). Devouring it, I found myself laughing out loud and misty-eyed about a complete stranger. The article tells the remarkable story of Molly Pratt, who faced terminal cancer and death with an unusual combination of humor, acceptance, love, and gratitude. Once so angry at God upon her father’s untimely death at 47 years old from pancreatic cancer that she flipped God off not with one but both hands. Yes, she was real and spicy, even at 10 years old. Fast forward seven decades later and rather than dwelling on what she was losing, Molly repeatedly looked back with thanksgiving: *“I’ve done it all... It was a wonderful time. I’m so grateful.”* She recognized that her life contained heartbreak and suffering, and she chose to see the whole of it as a gift and God always at the helm of her life ship. Molly’s story offers some powerful lessons:

1. **Gratitude changes how we see the present.** Molly refused to let the fact that her life was ending prevent her from enjoying the life she still had.
2. **Gratitude remembers without becoming trapped in nostalgia.** She treasured her memories of family, friends, Charleston, adventures, and her spouse—but those memories became reasons to give thanks rather than reasons to wish she could return to the past.
- 3.

**Faith does not require certainty about everything.** Molly

acknowledged that God did not always answer her prayers as she wanted. Yet, over time, she came to say, *"I know His hand is on my shoulder."* Her faith became trust in God's presence rather than an expectation that God would give her the outcome she wanted. 4.

**Gratitude becomes a way of loving.** Her final lessons were remarkably simple: *"Do not hurt anybody," "When you can help, help,"* and *"It's important to be loving."* Gratitude for life moved outward into generosity toward others. And her faith allowed her to receive life as a gift without pretending it was perfect. Molly had "4 rotten, lousy years and 76 great ones," as she put it. Gratitude doesn't deny suffering; it refuses to let suffering tell the whole story.

"It is telling that this generation of exodus wanderers never makes it to the promised land, perhaps because their nostalgia won't let them get there. Liberation and hope lie in wait for those who can stop pretending that the past was perfect and who can walk in faith toward God's future" (Erickson). Christian gratitude remembers the past without becoming trapped in it; it recognizes God's presence now and trusts God's future. Molly's life illustrates that an attitude of gratitude is not pretending everything is good; it is trusting that even in loss, God has given us enough grace, love, memory, and presence to say, "Thank you" for the life we have- and to remain open to what God is still doing. May God **awake our souls** that when we're struggling in the wilderness to believe that where God calls, God provides. When you're thirsty, look for that water God provides from a rock and remember to give thanks to God for what God has done and continues to do! Amen.