

“Into the Wilderness: Looking Back”

Oct 8, 2023 Montavilla & Tabor Heights United Methodist Church

Rev. Heather Riggs

### **Exodus 16:2-15 CEB**

**2** The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. **3** The Israelites said to them, “Oh, how we wish that the LORD had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”

**4** Then the LORD said to Moses, “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. **5** On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.” **6** So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “This evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt. **7** And in the morning you will see the LORD’s glorious presence, because your complaints against the LORD have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?” **8** Moses continued, “The LORD will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the LORD heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the LORD.”

**9** Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the LORD, because he’s heard your complaints.’” **10** As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

**11** The LORD spoke to Moses, **12** “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

**13** In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. **14** When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. **15** When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What<sup>[a]</sup> is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

## Into the Wilderness: Looking Back

“Oh, how we wish that the LORD had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”

Moses must have been thinking, You want to go back to Egypt??!!!! You have got to be kidding me!

- In Egypt they were slaves with horribly unsafe working conditions!
- In Egypt Pharaoh had ordered the death of all their sons
- In Egypt they were whipped and terrorized
- In Egypt they were treated like unwanted refugees with no rights under the law

And they want to go back????!!!!

Well...They did have plenty to eat in Egypt!

You see, the fertile Nile delta was the bread-basket of the ancient world, with the capacity to grow two crops per year. They grazed their animals on clover, which is more nutrient dense than grass, so there was abundant meat as well as grain, fruits and vegetables. According to antiquities experts at the British Museum, laborers like those who built the pyramids in Giza, were also provided a daily beer ration of 1 ⅓ gallons per person -- that’s over 10 pints of beer a day. (<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/a-sip-of-history-ancient-egyptian-beer/>)

Plentiful food (and beer!) was the \*one good thing\* about living in Egypt.

They were abused, terrorized and treated like low grade dog food, but they ate like kings... or rather, they ate like Egyptian workers, which was better than what they were scrounging up in the wilderness.

And in the midst of the very disorienting experience of escaping Egypt with only what they could carry, the good meals they used to have at the end of a day of slavery were a very compelling memory.

Sure, they tried to kill all of our sons...

Yeah, we were whipped and beaten and tortured...

...but the food was excellent!

It seems like a strange reaction, but something happens inside of us, when we experience trauma and oppression for a prolonged period of time.

We get used to it.

We adapt.

We figure out how the system works, even if the system is twisted and wrong, and we find a way to survive.

### **learning to live better can feel harder than continuing to suffer**

Oddly enough, learning to live better can feel harder than continuing to suffer, whether better means:

- getting clean and sober
- Leaving an abusive relationship
- Starting a better job
- Giving up a bad habit, or
- Starting a new good habit

Even when the changes are clearly for the better, changing our lives for the better is still disruptive enough that memories about the “good old days,” can feel very powerful, even when the old days weren’t so good.

But when our lives start to get better, our old survival techniques often don’t work so well anymore.

In Egypt, looking forward to a good meal and 10+ pints of beer was a way of getting through the very hard days.

In the wilderness, on their way towards a new life, turning around to go back to the fine-dining of Egypt would have been a death sentence.

### **There is no going back, there is only going forward and trusting God to lead us into a better future.**

As with so many things in life, there is no going back, there is only going forward and trusting God to lead us into a better future.

We know this right?

We know that the Israelites were being stupid when they wanted to go back to Egypt, because we know how their story ends. But they didn’t know that.

When we’re in the middle of our own story,

When we feel like we are in the wilderness of something we have never done before,

The familiarity of the past, even a horrible past, looks comforting in comparison to the uncertain goodness of the unknown future.

Our culture is in a season of change.

Everything is changing!

How we work

How we communicate

How we shop

How we access information

How we do church

The digital revolution was in full swing before the pandemic, COVID just kicked the shift into high speed!

And everybody is experiencing this -we're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat - some people are pretty comfortable navigating new technologies and new ways of doing things and others feel bewildered and left behind.

When we feel lost in the wilderness of change, we tend to look back to what we knew in an idealized way.

We start daydreaming about the past.

Oh how we wish we could go back to "the good old days!"

- When all the men had family wage jobs (unless you were a person of color)
- And the women stayed home and raised their kids (unless you were a woman of color and then you were probably cleaning somebody else's house and raising their kids)
- And people stayed married, (except they didn't - divorce rates among Gen X and younger are actually lower than the WW2 and Baby Boomer generations)
- And we had good schools (if you were white)
- And everybody went to church (but you weren't really welcome if you were LGBTQ+, divorced, physically or mentally disabled, or asked too many questions)

This rose colored view of the past isn't just an Israelite thing.

It isn't just an older people thing - there are plenty of younger people who want to turn back time in this country!

It's a deeply human thing.

We all look back when we're facing the uncertainty of an unknown future.  
And rather than praying to God, who is more than ready to provide us with bread for the journey, our knee-jerk reaction is usually to complain to our human leaders, don't we!

We complain to our boss when our job changes.  
We complain to our politicians when our city changes.  
We complain to our parents or our grown children when our family changes.  
We complain to our Pastor when the church changes.  
Us Pastors complain to our DS and our Bishop...

When who we need to complain to is God.  
When what we need is to spend some time in prayer letting God help us unpack our emotional baggage, so we can move into this new season of our lives.

But, I just want to warn you, that God probably isn't going to give you exactly what you ask for anymore than God gave the Israelites what they asked for.

They wanted meat and bread and beer like they had in Egypt.  
And instead, God gave them Manna.

Manna - roughly translated, means - "what is this???"

If they spoke English, they might have called Manna - Whatsit

As in,  
Here, have some Whatsit -  
What is it?  
Whatsit.  
But what is it?  
Nobody knows, that's why we call it whatsit!

What God provides may not look like anything we have seen before, but God will get us through the wilderness of change.

**Changes that you struggle with. Changes that bring you joy.**

So I want to take a few minutes, right now, to unpack some of our baggage with God.

I'm going to ask you to close your eyes, or choose a fixed point to look at, like a candle or the cross, or a stained glass window. This just helps you focus. Eyes closed or fixed on one thing.

1. List 3 ways that life has changed in the past 10 years that you struggle with.
  - a. Put your hand over your heart and take a moment to feel the grief.
  - b. Grief for things you miss, people you miss, ways of doing things you miss.
  - c. Invite God to hold you in your grief.
2. List 3 ways your life has changed that bring you joy.
  - a. Think of things that are so good that they bring a smile to your face...
  - b. If you can, actually smile. Activate those face muscles and feel how that changes how your whole body feels.
  - c. Give Thanks to God for the good in your life

This spiritual practice is based on the Ignatian Examine.

It's a good daily practice for inviting God to help you deal with times of great change, which is kinda all of us right now.

Try it for a week. Every evening take just a few minutes to share with God the things that have been challenging that day and to give thanks for the blessings of each day. Not all spiritual practices are for everyone, but this one works best over time. Give it at least a week of daily practice and see if it helps you feel cope with this season of change.