

*The Start of Something New: "Are We There, Yet?"*

September 14, 2008

Year A: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

[Exodus 16:2-15 \(NRSV\)](#)

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>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."

<sup>4</sup>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. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

<sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, <sup>7</sup>and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?"

<sup>8</sup>And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him -- what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

<sup>9</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.' " <sup>10</sup>And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

<sup>11</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses and said, <sup>12</sup>"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.' "

<sup>13</sup>In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.

A woman went into an airport shop, bought a book to read and a package of cookies to eat while waiting to board her plane.

She took a seat in the terminal and opened her book. She was immediately distracted by the man sitting two seats to her right. Incredibly, the man was actually fumbling to open the package of cookies on the seat between

them. And when he put his hand into the package, extracted a cookie and ate it, she couldn't believe her eyes.

She was so shocked to see a total stranger nonchalantly starting to eat her cookies that she didn't know what to do -- and she didn't want to create a scene. Finally, she reached over and removed a cookie from the package and ate it.

"I'll show him," she said to herself. "No way is he going to eat all of my cookies!" Then the man reached out for a second cookie and ate it.

"I'll show him," the woman told herself again, and she took a second cookie and ate it. Then the man ate a third cookie, and she did likewise. And even though no message seemed to be getting through to the man, she persisted in carrying out this scenario until all the cookies were gone.

As they boarded the plane, she still persisted in her effort to try to humiliate the man, glaring at him with fire in her eyes. Then she took her seat, she was so upset she reached into her purse for a tissue, and there, in her purse, lay *her* still-unopened package of cookies.<sup>1</sup>

"Oh a complaining we will go, a complaining we will go. . . You know if I had to go with an alternate title for this sermon series it probably would go along the lines of complaints or complaining. It seems all we hear and will hear in the coming weeks is about the poor old Hebrews who are pretty sure that God just wants them dead out in the dessert. Just listen to these complaints. Last week we heard how they complained when the Egyptian army came bearing down their neck. 14.11-12: They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

This week in verse 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." And just wait until next week when they complain about the lack of water.

Folks, we are just starting the journey with the Hebrew people for the Promised Land – their new homeland – the home of their ancestors. We are on the start of something new. A couple of weeks ago we began this journey by urgently packing our bags. Then last we realized there's no turning back even if we wanted to. And today – we are just longing for it be over!

This passage reminds me of a scene in the movie *Cinderella II* – yes, they made a sequel and yes we own a lot of Disney movies. Anyone, the movie starts soon after the honeymoon of Cinderella and her Prince. They just get back when the King tells his son that they must leave quickly for a foreign trip, "Important matters of state to attend to," he says. He then tells Princess Cinderella that she must stay behind to plan the upcoming Ball. When Princess Cinderella protests that she knows nothing about planning a Ball, the King tells her: "It is the job of the Princess to plan the Ball and the King's job to endure it."

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Safarik. "Who's cookies?" *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part III*. 50.

In essence that is what the Hebrew people are doing on this journey through the wilderness – they are enduring it. And this week shows that they are struggling even to endure it.

It reminds me of a story I heard about a prayer once. A woman was praying: “So far today, God, I’ve done all right. I haven’t gossiped, I haven’t lost my temper. I haven’t been grumpy, nasty, or selfish. I’m really glad for that. But in a few minutes, God, I’m going to get out of bed; and from that moment on, I’m probably going to need a lot of help.”

Now for these Israelites they’ve figuratively been out of bed for a very long time and they need a lot of help. They don’t like their condition and if the food they have is either not enough or just not good quality they are going let others know about it. And they certainly don’t like Moses. They are longing for their old life – you know the one in slavery and oppression. In their thinking they had bread even if they ate it by the fleshpots – our equivalent of a garbage dump.

Now what I find so fascinating about these passages is that these Hebrew people are never happy. They are looking for happiness in all of the wrong places. When they were in Egypt and they didn’t like their slave conditions and they cried out to God to help them they wanted happiness. God brings Moses, rains down the 10 plagues, and leads them out to freedom. The Hebrew people think they are happy. But they’re lead around to wonder in the dessert before they reach the Red Sea. The Egyptian army comes after them and instead of trusting that God will help them they cry out because they are not happy. So, God opens up the Sea, they walk through, the Egyptians are killed, and they are safe. God comes through for them again but the Hebrew people are not happy. When they don’t have enough food they cry out to Moses because they are not happy. God comes through for them again and as we’ll learn next week they are not happy. These Hebrew people they are chasing happiness all over the dessert..

Folks, as we read these passages in Exodus and learn about this journey there’s one thing you need to know. Our Jewish brothers and sisters read and study this scripture because they are seen as **the** pivotal moment that defines who they are. As Christians we are defined by the Easter event, but for Jews it is this journey that defines them. I tell you this because Jesus was an observant Jew. He knew these stories well. His followers knew how important this moment was in defining their faith journey.

This journey for us is the Start of Something New. It is not just a sermon series. It is not something we pick up just because the fall is a convenient time to preach on it. This is the journey to the Promised Land. This is our journey. We started packing. Then we realized we can’t back. The Hebrew people are complaining because they are always searching for something better. They are looking for happiness. Folks, this is the experience of life. This speaks to our faith journey. We are a people on the search. It’s OK to admit that we long for happiness. There is so much out there that is not working out – a relationship with a family member, an unsatisfied job, mounting debt, a house or car that is continually in disrepair. We are looking for happiness because we want to be content. There is nothing wrong with that unless you’re never content. Folks, if

you are continually searching for happiness you'll never get to the Promised Land.

Recently I heard one of our Investment Bankers in town talk about the economy. He said that back in spring when all of those stimulus checks went out from the government there was a belief that would solve the economic mess. Well we all know what has since happened. Now this Investment Banker is hearing again – all we need is just one more stimulus check and then we'll be happy.

Before I took Dave Ramsey and was deep in credit card debt I believed – I truly believed - that all I needed was just one more raise and life would be happy. We're in a college town and many of us are taking classes. How many of us believe: If I can just get through this semester then life will be happier. Or maybe you are close to graduating and your belief is: If I can just get a full-time job then I'll be happy. Maybe it's not school you're thinking about. Your car's not working right and you think if we just buy a new car then I'll be happy then. Or maybe it's your marriage and your communication has broken down and you're thinking if I can just get out of thing then I'll be happy then.

Folks, we are a people constantly chasing happiness. Joe Land tells this wonderful story. If you've taken *Financial Peace* you may have heard Dave Ramsey tell it.

Joe says that this chase for happiness actually begins in Kindergarten. When we're in Kindergarten we look over at the 1<sup>st</sup> graders and we see them reading and we begin to think to ourselves, I'll be happy when I can read. I'll be happy when I'm 1<sup>st</sup> grader. Then when you're in the 1<sup>st</sup> grader you experience these mean people called 4<sup>th</sup> graders. You know who they are? They rule the school and you begin to think to yourself, "I'll be happy when I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> grader." Then when you're in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade you look next door and you see the Middle Schoolers and you see them playing football, having cheerleaders, changing classes, and you think to yourself, "I'll be happy when I'm in Middle School."

Then you get over to Middle School and someone's brother or sister is in high school and you learn that they have driver's license and you're thinking to your self, "If I can get to high school, I can have a driver's license. Freedom! I'll be free and then I'll be happy."

Then you get to high school and that same brother and sister is in college and you hear that in college that they don't even care if you go to class and you think to yourself, "I'll be happy then." Then you are in college and your net worth is a ½ a box of No-Doze. And your trying to work by delivering pizzas and throwing newspapers or throwing pizzas and delivering newspapers. You trying to figure this thing out, taking all-nighters for test and you thinking, "If I can't just get out of here, and start my life with a new job then I'll be happy then."

And you get out of college and you start your new job and you know you're smart because they hired you. And you know everything and you act like you know everything and in a few months they fire you. And you think, "Man, I'll be happy if I can get just some stability." And I'll be happy if I can meet that someone special. And I'll be happy if I can have that 2.5 children in a house with a picket fence. "I'll be happy if I can just walk down that aisle."

And then your parents call and they tell you that they will be happy if you start having some grandbabies and you're thinking "I'll be happy when we can start having a family." And then you have that baby and you say to yourself I'll be happy when they won't do that diaper thing.

Do you remember this?

You're thinking If I can get them potty-trained, get that last one potty-trained then I'll be happy. And that last one is potty-trained and you blink and they are teenagers and you say, "once they leave home, I'll be happy."

And when they leave home you say to them, "If you come home I'll be happy." And then you tell them to get married and say, "if you give me some grandbabies, so I can change diapers, I'll be happy, then."

Folks, if you don't watch it, you'll be chasing happiness all of your life.<sup>2</sup>

Are we there, yet? Have we found happiness, yet? This scripture speaks to us because we are searching, we are crying out to God for some help, some direction in our life. This journey – this wilderness travel – can be frustrating. We want happiness in this life. We want things easy. But you know, folks, if we haven't arrived at perfection, yet, if we haven't found our Promised Land, yet, if we haven't arrived at that place where we don't need to look anymore then this journey is for you. For this passage is speaking, it is screaming out to God today. And it's saying – you are not there, yet, you have not reached the Promised Land, yet, but just sit back and enjoy the journey, because you'll arrive, someday. The Promised Land is coming and along each step of the path God is providing and God is leading us in the right direction. Don't chase happiness because you won't find it. Don't worry about arriving at the destination just, yet because there is so much we can learn. Just sit back and enjoy the journey.

One night Rabbi Isaac was told in his dream to go to far-away Prague and there to dig for hidden treasure under a bridge that led to the palace of the King. He did not take the dream seriously, but when it recurred four or five times, he made up his mind to go in search of the treasure.

When he got to the bridge, he discovered to his dismay that it was heavily guarded day and night by soldiers. All he could do was gaze at the bridge from a distance. But since he went there every morning, the captain of the guards came up to him one day to find out why. Rabbi Isaac, embarrassed as he was to tell his dream to another soul, told the captain everything, for he liked the good-natured character of this Christian.

The captain roared with laughter and said, "Good heavens! You a rabbi and you take dreams so seriously? Why, if I were stupid enough to act on my own dreams, I would be wandering around in Poland today. Let me tell you one that I had last night that keeps recurring frequently: A voice tells me to go to Krakow and dig for treasure in the corner of the kitchen of one Isaac, son of Ezekiel! Now wouldn't it be the most stupid thing in the world to search around in Krakow for a man called Isaac and another called Ezekiel when half the male population there probably has one name and the other half the other?"

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<sup>2</sup> Joe Land as told by Dave Ramsey. DVD disk: Buyer Beware. 2006.

The Rabbi was stunned. He thanked the captain for his advice, hurried home, dug up the corner of his kitchen, and found a treasure abundant enough to keep him in comfort till the day he died.<sup>3</sup>

Folks, the Hebrew people searched and searched and searched for that elusive happiness, but it was right in front of them. God was with them every step of the journey. In our journey to something new let us step forward with the confidence of God and find happiness. Are we there, yet? No! But we're going to learn a lot on the journey. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony de Mello. "Found treasure in own home." *Ibid., Part IV.* 32.