

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

September 21, 2008

Year A: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Exodus 17:1-7 (NRSV)

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. ²The 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?"

³But 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?"

⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Today, in our passage, things get nasty. You remember we are in this sermon series called *The Start of Something New*. Right now we are in the thick of the journey of the Hebrew people. We've been following them since they got ready to leave their slave conditions in Egypt. And each week we've walked and journeyed and travelled and walked and searched and travelled with these wondering people as they inch closer and closer to their Promised Land.

Last week we noticed a pattern beginning to occur – complaint after complaint after complaint. They just couldn't seem to find happiness and boy did they complain about it. Well, today, they continue the pattern. They complain about the lack of water but today there is something different in their grievance. Today it turns nasty and for the first time Moses is afraid for his safety. ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

After the church service a little boy told the pastor, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money."

"Well, thank you," the pastor replied. "But, why?"

“Because my daddy says you’re one of the poorest preachers we’ve ever had.”¹

Three young boys were walking on the sidewalk arguing over whose daddy was the greatest. One said, “My dad is the greatest because he is the president of the town bank.”

The second boy said, “That’s pretty good, but my daddy owns two grocery stores in town!”

The third boy said, “That’s nothing, my dad is a preacher, and he owns hell. He came home last night and told my mom that the Church Board gave it to him!”²

Unfortunately for Moses the tone of the criticism is much more serious. What a text for what we are going through today. We read Exodus and I’m guessing that our mind goes to our current political campaign. I don’t think I’ll get a disagreement here that the politics of running for President has turned ugly at times. Or maybe you read Exodus and your mind goes to our leadership in Washington especially on this economic crisis. You know I’ve heard more than one person say how angry they with what is going on with our economic situation.

Speaking of the journey of the Hebrew people we definitely learned last week that they were not happy. Now, folks, when I think of the word – unhappy – I think of disappointment. A sermon that fell flat and I’m unhappy about it. As a staunch Nebraska fan, last year, I was unhappy a lot. When I think of the word unhappy I think of someone who hasn’t quite found that direction to their Promised Land, yet. Unhappy!

Before I entered the professional ministry I was a waiter at Valentino’s in Lincoln. Most of us were working there just biding our time until our career started or we were done with school. But, there was this one guy. I don’t remember his name but when he went to work with us we found out that he had been there before. It was obvious. He did not need any training for he knew what he was doing. Well, one day after the lunch shift was over he asked me for a ride home. I asked why he didn’t have a car and he told me that he lost his driver’s license and in fact he was on work release for the county jail and needed a ride home before he went back to lock-up. I remember on the ride we talked about his plans. He told me that someday he wanted to go back to school. Someday he wanted to get a better job than working days at Valentino’s. Someday he wanted to quit drinking so he wouldn’t keep losing his license. A couple of years later I had a hospital call in Lincoln and decided to eat at my old Valentino’s. I didn’t recognize anyone working there except for my old co-worker. I’m guessing he hadn’t found that path to his Promised Land, yet.

Now folks, that is unhappiness. But you know what we find here is more than just mere unhappiness. We find frustration. We find deep-seated anger. We find a population scared out of their wits that they will indeed die. We find a demand that life must be better. This is not a people just searching for happiness. They are searching for things to indeed be better.

¹ “The poorest preacher.” *Seth’s Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 18.

² “He owns Hell.” *Ibid.*, 18.

Aboard an airplane one day, everything was going fine until someone noticed smoke coming out of one of the engines. The pilot came on the PA and announced, “I’m sorry to inform you that one of our engines has failed, but don’t worry we still have three more. This will just mean a slight delay in our scheduled arrival time. Just to re-assure you, I’d also like you to know that nothing will happen to this plane as we have four ministers of religion on board.”

Someone at the back of the plane piped up, “I’d feel happier if we had four engines and three ministers!”³

Oh isn’t that what is going on in our country today? I tell you what, I have seen more interest in our economy, more interest in debt, more interest in mortgages, more interest in personal financial education, than I have ever seen in my short life-time. When I started listening to Dave Ramsey and telling everyone about what I was learning you know the kind of looks I got? Kind of a glazed look like “oh here he goes talking about money again.” Not now!

Now I realize I’m different. I was raised in a household where my dad ran a bank and I knew most of the family that owned that bank pretty well. And I know that there has always been a few that like to talk about the economy: business majors, people in the insurance business, bankers, etc. But everyone else – it seemed – was going on worrying about life and not paying attention – really – to this finance stuff. But when things in our economy go south, when people’s grip on their cash gets tighter, when everyone conversation centers around money and finance and the economy – you know things are different. Folks, we are a people demanding that it get better.

This is where the Hebrew people are coming from. It started with just a few complaints and it kept coming. These complaints are beyond just mere unhappiness. They are demanding action. Folks, just change a few words in our passage today – put a modern twist on it about the economy – and it is as if God was speaking to us today.

As I said last week we have been following this journey of the Israelites. But we are not just mere followers. We are on our own journey. We are in the midst of starting something new and in light of our bleak economy we are looking for to try that cookbook, *60 ways to prepare Alpo and LOVE IT*. But seriously, in this start of OUR journey we’ve seen a lot of beginnings. School has started. Our town has been infused with the energy of our college students. And even though our weather can’t decide if it’s hot or cold we know that a new season is upon us. We’ve started this journey and we’ve thought, “let’s give it a try.” Maybe it’s a chance to renew our faith with God. Maybe we can connect better in a relationship with a family member. Maybe we can try something different like that Dave Ramsey course, or Alpha, or volunteer with Sunday School, youth group, or Kid’s Nite. Where ever your journey began, it has started. You’ve been making some changes on this path toward the Promised Land and like the Hebrews you might be getting a bit cranky, maybe angry, maybe a little disillusioned, or even scared. And your complaints, well they are just not cutting it. So we reach this point in our journey and we want to know will things get better. We want to know like the Hebrews are we even on the right path with

³ “Want 4 engines and 3 pastors.” *Ibid., Part II.* 47.

God. Folks, in our search for the Promised Land knowing the answer to that question will indeed make things better even in our turbulent times.

Sandra felt as low as the heels of her Birkenstocks as she pushed against a November gust and the florist shop door. Her life had been easy, like a spring breeze. Then in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, a minor automobile accident stole her heart. During this Thanksgiving week she would have delivered a son. She grieved over her loss. As if that weren't enough, her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose holiday visit she coveted, called saying she could not come. What's worse, Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting her grief was a God-given path to maturity that would allow her to empathize with others who suffer. Had she lost a child? No! She has no idea what I'm feeling, thought Sandra with a shudder. Thanksgiving? Thankful for what?, she wondered. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?

"Good afternoon, can I help you?" the flower shop clerk's approach startled her. "Sorry," said Jenny, "I just want you to think I was ignoring you."

"I . . . I need an arrangement," stammered Sandra. "For Thanksgiving?" Sandra nodded

"Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favor I call the Thanksgiving Special?" Jenny saw Sandra's curiosity and continued. "I'm convinced that flowers tell stories, that each arrangement insinuates a particular feeling. Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude this Thanksgiving?"

"Not exactly!" Sandra blurted. "Sorry, but in the last five months, everything that could go wrong has."

Sandra regretted her outburst but was surprised when Jenny said, "I have the perfect arrangement for you." The door's small bell suddenly rang. "Barbara! Hi, let me get your order," Jenny said. She politely excused herself from Sandra and walked toward a small workroom. She quickly reappeared carrying a massive arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Only, the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped, no flowers.

"Want this in a box?" Jenny asked. Sandra watched for Barbara's response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems and no flowers! She waited for laughter, for someone to notice the absence of flowers atop the thorny stems, but neither woman did.

"Yes, please. It's exquisite," Barbara replied with an appreciative smile. "You'd think after three years of getting the special, I'd not be so moved by its significance, but I can feel it right here, all over again." She gently tapped her chest. "My family will love this one. Thanks."

Sandra stared. Why so normal a conversation about so strange an arrangement? She wondered.

"Uh," said Sandra pointing. "That lady just left with, ah. . . uh. . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, you gave her no flowers!"

"Right, I cut off the flowers."

"Cut them off?"

"Off. Yep. That's the Special. I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet."

"I just cannot believe people would pay for that!" In spite of herself she chuckled.

"Do you really want to know why?"

"I couldn't leave this shop without knowing. I'd think of nothing else!"

"That might be good," mused Jenny. "Well," she continued, "Barbara came into the shop three years ago feeling very much like you feel today. She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she faced major surgery."

"Ooooh!" murmured Sandra.

"That same year, I had lost my husband," Jenny went on. "I assumed complete responsibility for the shop and for the first time, spent the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel."

"What did you do?"

"I learned to be thankful for thorns."

Sandra's eyebrows lifted. "Thorns?"

"I'm a Christian, Sandra. I've always thanked God for good things in life and I never thought to ask God why good things happened to me, but when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time to learn that dark times are important. I always enjoyed the 'flowers' of life but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God's comfort. you know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we're afflicted and from God's consolation we learn to comfort others."

Sandra sucked in her breath as she thought about the very thing her friend had tried to tell her. "I guess the truth is I don't want comfort. I've lost a baby and I'm angry with God."

She started to ask Jenny to "go on" when the door's bell diverted their attention.

"Hey, Phil!" shouted Jenny as a balding, rotund man entered the shop. She softly touched Sandra's arm and moved to welcome him. He tucked her under his side for a warm hug. "I'm here for twelve thorny long-stemmed stems!" Phil laughed, heartily.

"I figured as much," said Jenny, "and I've got them ready." She lifted a tissue-wrapped arrangement for m the refrigerated cabinet.

"Beautiful," exclaimed Phil. "My wife will love them!"

Sandra could not resist asking. "These are for your wife? Do you mind me asking, why thorns?"

"In fact, I'm glad you asked," Phil replied. "Four years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After fourty years, we were in a real mess, but with the Lord's guidance, we slogged through, problem by rotten problem. He rescued our marriage -- our Love, really. Last year at Thanksgiving I stopped in her for flowers. I must have mentioned surviving a touch process because Jenny told me that for a long time she kept a vase of rose stems - stems! - as a reminder of what she learned from "thorny" times. That was good enough for me. I took

home stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific thorny situation and give thanks for what the problem taught us.”

Phil paid Jenny, thanked her again and as he left, said to Sandra, “I highly recommend the Special!”

“I don’t know if I can be thankful yet for the thorns in my life.” Sandra said to Jenny. “it is still . . . too fresh.”

“Well,” Jenny replied carefully, “my experience says that thorns make roses more precious. We treasure God’s providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore so we might know His love. Do not resent thorns.”

Tears rolled down Sandra’s cheeks. For the first time since the accident she loosened her grip on resentment. “I’ll take those twelve long-stemmed thorns, please” she managed to choke out.

“I hoped you would,” Jenny said. “I’ll have them ready in a minute. then, every time you see them, remember to appreciate both good and hard times. We grow through both.”

“Thank you. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Nothing but a promise to allow our Lord to heal your heart. The first year’s arrangement is always on me.” Jenny smiled and handed a card to Sandra. “I’ll attach a card like this to your arrangement but maybe you’d like to read it first.”

It said: “My God, I have never thanked you for my thorns! I have thanked you a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear, teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed to you by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.” -- George Matheson.⁴

⁵The 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. ⁶I 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."

Time after time, God has seen it all. The good times: the celebration of leaving Egypt, the celebration after the Red Sea. And God has seen the bad times: the charging Egyptian army, the lack of food, and today the lack of water. And God has been there through the frustrating times: are we there, yet? But do you notice a pattern in each instance? God is with us every step of the way. I know this journey is long and we are not going to get to the Promised Land right away. But as I follow this journey, as I walk along this path, I know we won’t do it alone.

A few years ago, Cheryl, and her family, were facing a dreary Christmas eve. The husband, Jack, had been laid off for six months. “And it didn’t help when our car’s transmission died,” Cheryl recalled. As the year drew to a close, their financial picture looked bleaker and bleaker.

A special yearly tradition for this family was hot chocolate on Christmas Eve. However, the mother reluctantly informed her daughters there would be no

⁴ Mary Lou Andes. “A dozen thorns.” *Ibid., Part III.* 42.

hot chocolate this time. As they headed out the door for Christmas Eve worship service, Cheryl's eyes fell on their old artificial tree draped with last year's dulled tinsel. *I couldn't even squeeze any money for hot chocolate out of our budget*, she thought. During the service, she prayed, *Oh, Lord, You promised to take care of us. Have You forgotten us?* Although the entire service was one of hope, Cheryl felt less than uplifted by the message.

As she and the family bundled up in coats and scarves preparing to leave, the church youth worker came up to Cheryl's two daughters saying: "Wait!" She pulled a ribboned jar from her bag. "Merry Christmas." It was filled with hot chocolate mix!

Cheryl Morrison saw that gift as a sign that God was aware of the family plight. "The youth worker couldn't have known about our family tradition. And she didn't know that, to me, this simple gift was a reminder that God had not forgotten us after all."⁵

Folks, I know many of you are scared. I know this situation on Wall Street has made many of us angry. I know it seems we are not getting solutions fast enough. But what does God tell us. In one of my favorite passages, Ecclesiastes 1.9-10: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us." God has been with countless individuals on their journey to the Promised Land and I believe God has not let them down. Today, in these uncertain times, I believe, God is with you as well. Are we there, yet? No!!!!!! But God is with us every step of the way. Amen.

⁵ Victor Parachin. "Hot chocolate – a gift from God." *Ibid.*, Part V. 21.