

The Start of Something New: "A Taste for the Old Life"

October 12, 2008

Year A: Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A parish minister went to visit Bob, an elderly member of his congregation. He received a warm welcome from Bob and was soon invited in to sit for a cup of tea. While Bob was in the kitchen busy making tea, the minister waited. As he waited he spied a bowl of tempting looking peanuts on the table and he thought to himself, "I'm sure Bob won't mind if I take one or two. One or two became three or four, until the dish was empty. At that point, Bob came in with the tea and the minister said, "Bob, I hope you won't mind, but I've eaten those delicious peanuts."

"Oh, that's OK," said Bob, "since I've had my teeth out, I can only suck the chocolate off them anyway."¹

Today we wait. We are at an interesting juncture in our journey. We're in this fall sermon series – *The Start of Something New* – and we're following right along with the Hebrew people. We started with their journey of exodus from slavery in Egypt and almost immediately we found ourselves in the desert – the wilderness – and we're there a long time. There's lots of frustration. Lots of complaints about the lack of food and water and especially with no seemingly end in sight.

Last week in our passage we learn that Moses goes up the mountain to speak with God. While Moses is there he receives the 10 Commandments. Folks, that was 12 chapters ago and if you thumb quickly through those chapters you will see that they detail rule after rule. That is the scene up on the mountain, however, the Hebrew people, they don't know about the 10 Commandments, yet. They don't know about all of these laws, yet. All they know is that Moses is gone a long long time. That leads us to today's passage.

[Exodus 32:1-14 \(NRSV\)](#)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶They rose

¹ "Can only suck the chocolate off." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 4.

early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' "

⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Now I realize that I could be addressing a lot in this sermon – God's anger or Moses pleading to spare the Hebrew people or even this aspect of changing God's mind. However, if you want me to preach on any of those subjects you will need to buy the sermon. I will again auction off my services of preaching at the Fall Festival.

But today the title is "A Taste for the Old Life." But I'll tell you what, if I had to come up with an alternate title it would be: "what do we do when we wait?"

Linus of the *Peanuts* cartoon was one time building castles in the sand. He tells Charlie Brown: "Working with your hands is good therapy. It takes your mind off your troubles. Whenever I feel depressed I build sandcastles. I've been feeling pretty depressed lately!" Behind him, we see a dozen or so sandcastles.²

What do we do when we wait? Some of us build sandcastles. Some of us get out a book and read. Others find another opportunity to continue to work – get out the cell phone, have the laptop computer handy. Still others just sit and stew. But most often – if we have to wait we distract ourselves.

What do I do when I wait? I thought I knew until this weekend. As we were driving to Scottsbluff I was visiting with Brian Kottas, our District Superintendent. We were talking about this Sunday and the possibility if Olivia had to stay an extra day in the hospital and what we needed to do. I told Brian that if we were home I would be in good shape. My sermon is on waiting. This weekend I found that when I wait I watch the clock.

² Dan Safarik. "Linus builds sandcastles." *Ibid.*, Part III. 37.

I watched the minutes go by as we waited for the x-ray technician. I kept looking at my watch as we drove to Scottsbluff. I kept a close eye on the clock as we waited for Olivia to meet the surgeon. And I'll tell you what – those precious seconds that Olivia was under anesthesia and we had to wait to hear from surgery were the longest seconds and minutes and hours I have ever recorded.

What do we do when we wait? Rarely do we just sit in the moment. We look for ways to fill our time.

An elderly man lay dying in his bed. In death's agony, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength, and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands.

With labored breath, he leaned against the door-frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven. There, spread out upon newspapers on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man? Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table, landing on his knees in a rumpled posture. His parched lips parted; the wondrous taste of the cookie was already in his mouth; seemingly bringing him back to life. The aged and withered hand shakingly made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when it was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife. "Stay out of those," she said, "they're for the funeral."³

What do the Hebrew people do while they wait? They fall back onto their old life. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Now in some respects, who could blame them? Moses was up on that mountain for a long time. Scripture tells us 40 days. 40 is the Biblical symbol for an infinite amount of time. 40 days of rain for Noah. 40 years in the desert. 40 days of temptation for Jesus. 40 days of Lent. A long time – a long time to get things right. God is making a new society here and folks, that takes time. We're on this journey with the Hebrew people. We're starting something new and by golly its working. That exercise program – we've lost a few pounds. Maybe we're starting Dave Ramsey and we're seeing that cash envelope system really

³ "They're for the funeral." *Ibid.*, Part II. 47.

working. We just started Alpha and we're just starting to reconnect with God. Or maybe you are using this time to focus on your marriage, on your family, on job hunting and you're starting to see glimmer of progress.

But folks, what happens when we get stuck; when we have to wait. What happens if we have to wait on our weight to get down to its ideal? What happens if we have to wait on our budget to really work? What happens if we have to wait on God to provide us with the next direction? What happens if we have to wait on our spouse, our family member, our boss to meet us at least half-way? What happens when the fate of your family member resides in another professional? What do we do when we wait? For the Hebrew people, when they waited, they were tempted by their old life.

⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

There's a story about an Idaho man who wanted to change his relationship with his wife. Both he and his wife were making some significant changes in their marriage but there was one thing he couldn't change and that was his love of fishing. His wife was nearly nine months pregnant when a bunch of friends convinced him to go with them to Lake Crescent, Idaho. He was conflicted. He knew he should stay with his wife but he loved to fish. Finally the temptation was too great and she wasn't due for a few more weeks he so felt he could squeeze both in. When he was at the lake he caught a big trout, the biggest he had ever landed, and was elated.

He was crazed with joy, so telegraphed his wife: "I've got one; weighs 7 pounds, and she is a beauty."

A telegram came back from his wife: "So have I; weighs 8 pounds, 4 ounces. Not a beauty -- looks like you. Come home."⁴

I've mentioned to you in this sermon series that this Exodus journey for the Jewish people is the defining moment in their faith walk. To be an observant Jew means that one must start something new while following God. It also means being prepared to go through your own wilderness, to own up to those complaining moments, and to be tempted by old destructive habits.

Folks, if this sounds like the journey of our Jesus, you would be correct. Jesus was an observant Jew and so were his followers. When he was about 30 he started his new ministry and during those one to three years it was a wilderness path full of trying and joyous times. There sure were a lot of complaints, especially against the religious establishment. And we sure know he was tempted not to go through with his death and eventual Resurrection.

Folks, this is a journey. As we walk with God to do something different, as we walk to make a difference in this world, as we walk just to be better people, this walk by the Hebrew people is also our walk. When we're trying to change something, when we are trying to start something new do we ever get tempted by our old life? You bet we do. All the time.

⁴ Safarik. "Man gets fish, wife has baby." *Ibid., Part IV.* 38.

Recently, I heard something very disturbing. Countrywide was one of the largest mortgage companies that sold too many of those ARMS – Adjustable Rate Mortgages that started our crisis. Recently, they have been bought out by Bank of America. Their response to our crisis is to refinance their bad adjustable rate mortgages into something like an interest only loan. They tell us that they want to do this so that these families can stay in their homes. Bring down the payment and they will not be forced into the street.

Now folks, we've learned a lot about finances in this crisis. Or maybe you've learned in the Dave Ramsey course that this is a terrible plan. We know that that these mortgage payments will only go up again. Folks, what do we do when we wait on an economic crisis, well here's one company that is simply tempted by their old way of life.

As a student of personal financial education I am quite bothered by what I am seeing in this credit – let's call it what it is – a debt crisis. Now let's see if I got this whole thing right. To fix our current debt problem the government wants to loan out more money to banks because we want the banks to loan out more money so that more people can get into more debt all because we have a debt crisis. What do we do when we wait especially for an economic crisis to end? We are tempted by our old life.

Now let's turn to God. What if our wait was for God? Remember Moses was up there for LONG TIME and these people are pretty convinced that God is not responding. What do you do in times like that? You are tempted by your old way of life. Maybe you're trying out this new faith thing. You've started going to church again. You're reading the Bible. You've volunteered to help more. But something is missing, things are just not getting better and you begin to think – do we wait on God or do we go back to watching football on Sunday mornings or golf. What do we do when we wait on God especially with a crisis around us? We let someone intercede for us.

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' "

Brenda was a young woman who was invited to go rock climbing. Although she was very scared, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff. In spite of her fear, she put on the gear, took a hold of the rope, and started up the face of that rock.

Well, she got to a ledge where she could take a breather. As she was hanging on there, the safety rope snapped against Brenda's eye and knocked her contact lens.

Well, here she is, on a rock ledge, with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her. Of course, she looked and looked and looked, hoping it had landed on the ledge, but it just wasn't there. Here she was, far from home, her sight now blurry. She was desperate and began to get upset, so she prayed to the Lord to help her to find it.

When she got to the top, a friend examined her eye and her clothing for the lens, but there was no contact lens to be found. She sat down, despondent, with the rest of the party, waiting for the rest of them to make it up the face of the cliff.

She looked out across range after range of mountains, thinking of that Bible verse that says, "The eyes of the Lord run to and from throughout the whole earth." She thought, "Lord, You can see all these mountains. You know every stone and leaf, and you know exactly where my contact lens is. Please help me."

Finally, they walked down the trail to the bottom. At the bottom there was a new party of climbers just starting up the face of the cliff. One of them shouted out, "Hey, you guys! Anybody lose a contact lens?"

Well, that would be startling enough, but you know why the climber saw it? An ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying it on its back.

Brenda's father is a cartoonist. When she told him the incredible story of the ant, the prayer and the contact lens, he drew a picture of an ant lugging that contact lens with the words, "Lord, I don't know why you want me to carry this thing. I can't eat it, and it's awfully heavy. But if this is what you want me to do, I'll carry it for you."⁵

What do we do when we wait? We throw ourselves into the hands of one who's been right where we are. Jesus the Christ will not only intercede for us and with us, he's been there. He's faced the temptation of the old way of life. He's faced the challenges of the wilderness. But more importantly he walked the journey toward something new and reminded us that the Promised Land is indeed coming. What do we do when we wait? We ask, we plead, we pray for Christ's guidance. Amen.

⁵ Josh and Karen Zarandona. "Ant and the contact lens." *Ibid.*, Part V. 32.