

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Oh, the good old days. Back to the days when they had plenty of food to eat and plenty of water to drink. They wished for the good ole days when “[they] sat by the fleshpots and ate [their] fill of bread.” Fleshpots does not exactly sound very savory, but it refers to cooking pots. I am imagining sitting next to pots filled with stewed beef and eating it with bread. For those of us with high cholesterol, being able to eat red meat just might be the “good old days.” So, what were the good old days these Israelites? It was a life of slavery in Egypt! They spent long hours seven days a week making bricks and building pyramids. They had no rights. Occasionally, Pharaoh killed all the male children. Those were the good old days!

Why were days of slavery “the good old days.” Why would anyone want to go back to days of slavery? These Israelites were overjoyed when they were able to leave Egypt, leave their lives of slavery! They were overjoyed when they were delivered from certain death when God parted the Red Sea. They were so overjoyed they were singing. They were so overjoyed they were dancing, dancing for three days. Yes, God’s people do dance. I heard a story once of a man leading a workshop on worship, and he was encouraging the participants to move around a bit. There happened to be a pastor from an African church visiting in the states and he was at the meeting. The workshop leader made some comment about Africans dancing. The African said, “We haven’t danced since the missionaries came!” By the way, even Presbyterians dance, although many think Presbyterians are the frozen chosen. But the Israelites danced. They were overjoyed with their new-found freedom. But now they want to go back to enjoy their posts of stew meat and bread? What is that all about?

The Israelites are in the wilderness now. They may have wished it was a wilderness. Wilderness really is a euphemism, for desert. Being in the desert, they lack for water, they lack for food. They become hungry, and worry if they will die in that God-forsaken desert. They reminisce about the buffet line back in Egypt. As Barry Blyvies was reminiscing about the good old days, "In my day, we didn't have no rocks. We had to go down to the creek and wash our clothes by beating them with our heads." The Israelites empty bellies cause them to have nostalgia about their slavery. In slavery, every day is the same. There is something comfortable about suffering, because it is predictable. Freedom can be much more trying. Out there in the wilderness, when they have to depend on God, when they are in unknown territory, there is no predictability. They wake up every day having to trust that God will lead them somewhere. As United Methodist pastor Brian Erickson writes, "They are suffering from post-miraculous stress disorder."

The Israelites, reminiscing about their days in Egypt, their days of slavery, are blinded to what God is now doing for them. Earlier, when the Israelites complained about the lack of food, God sent manna each morning. The manna was a bread like substance that sustained the Israelites while they were in the wilderness. "Manna" literally means "what is it," for when the Israelites first saw it, "They sked themselves, "What is it?" I hope it was gluten-free. In our story for today, they complain about the lack of water. So God instructed Moses to strike a certain rock, and water came gushing out of it. The Israelites are trapped into a land of Massah, which means "test," and Meribah, which means "find fault." They wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They did not permit the women to ask for directions! It was a time for the people to learn

how good God is, of how God provides for them, how God . Just as they ate while in Egypt, now God was providing for them in the wilderness. It was a time for the Israelites to see what God was doing for them now, and not be blinded by their nostalgia.

Nostalgia never leads you forward, for nostalgia creates an impossible standard. We see the past through rose-colored glasses. We sugarcoat the past. We remember a much improved version of the past. We have a Norman Rockwell revisionist lens. We forget the problems, the stress, the worrying. It is like our grandparents who talked about the good old days when they had to walk three miles to school. They forget the snowstorms and thunderstorms they walked through. Nostalgia, the good old days, can cause us to be stuck in our glorified past and prevent us from moving forward.

I want to raise the question of whether nostalgia is preventing many churches from moving forward. Are we seeing the nostalgia of the past holding back the church. The church of my youth, the church of your youth, no longer exists. The church when I started my ministry forty years ago no longer exists. Thus, we can no longer do church as we did forty, fifty, sixty years ago. In 1965, the Presbyterian Church reached its peak membership of 4.25 million. In 2016, fifty-one years later, our membership is a little more than 1.4 million.

Of course many are concerned about the decline. J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of our General Assembly, has been going around telling the church, "We're not dying. We are Reforming. We are moving towards a new future as a denomination." Throughout the centuries there have been transformative experiences that help the church refocus on the essence of what it means to be the church, to remember that

the church is called to witness to the world, even, as he says, at the risk of losing our lives as the church.

The mission of the church is not, and never has been institutional survival, of keeping the doors open. The mission of the church has never been to get more people in the church so that the church has the resources, people to do the work, to fill slots on boards and committees, and the money they bring with them to support the church. The mission of the church is discipleship, not membership. Mission is not about taking care of ourselves, about keeping the institution going. The mission of the church is serving others, serving those for whom God is concerned.

Jan Edmiston, one of the co-moderators of the Presbyterian Church, shared a story when she was with our presbytery at its meeting in August. She met with a group from one church and asked them what they were most proud about their church. One by one they each answered, "The windows in the sanctuary." Should not the response be, "Every Saturday morning we feed the homeless in our church fellowship hall." "Every year we send a team to work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance in a location that was devastated by a natural disaster." "Each month we provide a safe place for gay and lesbian high schoolers, for LGBTQ youth, in our community to gather."

Let's not be stuck in the nostalgia of what the church was fifty, sixty years ago. We cannot be stuck for God has a future for the church. And let's not be immobilized because we think the church is dying. Because God has some exciting mission for the church. The question is, are we willing to participate in God's exciting mission?

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.