

## Nostalgia

Exodus 17:1-7

Matthew 21:23-32

Ah, “the good old days”! I’m not really sure when they were, but I remember them well! Even though we hate to admit it, we all sometimes long for the way things were...a simpler vision of the world.

In today’s Exodus story, the people were having a serious nostalgia break.

The entire nation, thousands of people, are delivered from certain death when God makes a way for them through the Red Sea. God hears prayers and makes things happen. But then, the story tells us, they forget...

Yeah, no big surprise, is it? God leads them to safety, leads them through the Red Sea, they spend three days dancing and celebrating but in just a few verses, things aren’t looking so good. They are getting desperate for water and their options are sorely lacking. As they get hungry, they begin to reminisce about the food back in Egypt. Their hunger is the spice that sweetens their memories of their days in slavery.

This is a pretty good sign that things are going downhill in a hurry...when you start to idealize your past, and your past involved being a slave to the Egyptian Pharaoh! “Back in the good old days...when we spent all day making bricks and building pyramids and when we had no rights and the Pharaoh occasionally killed all our male children...well...*those were the days!*”

The thing about slavery is every day is the same. There is something comfortable about suffering, because it is predictable. Freedom is much, much harder. Out there in the wilderness, when they must depend on God they are in uncharted territory...there is no predictability. Every day they must wake up and trust that God will lead them, God will provide.

One author called this a case of PMSD, that is: “post-miraculous stress disorder”. I guess it’s not surprising then, that the Israelites get trapped in rosy revisions of their past and are blinded to the almost constant provision of God in their present. They become numbed to the “now” and find themselves trapped between the spiritual lands of “Massah” (test) and “Meribah” (find fault).

We get it, we've visited those lands before. In fact, I think some folk book their annual holidays well in advance so they can secure a permanent reservation in those lands of "test" and "find fault".

That's the problem with some restoration movements in specific and nostalgia in general...it can't lead you forward, because nostalgia sets up an impossible standard; a standard that is candy-coated, brightly polished, much improved version of the past, of what once was. The present can never match up with an idealized past...something like a "Glorious Past 2.0" with all the problems, thorns, bumps and bruises removed.

So, what happens? We get stuck...stuck in a present that can never match up to the past and living lives in perpetual ungratefulness for the place we find ourselves.

This PMSD still strikes God's people, quietly stealing our joy and making us indifferent to the flowing streams of living water God has provided here in our wilderness. But if it is not joyful, at least it's comfortable in its predictability, right?

Well, at least until this Jesus guy shows up. Once again, things weren't going all that great for the Jews; they were a captive nation, struggling to survive and trapped in a spiral of "good-old-day-itis"! The people were under the rule of the Romans and enslaved to an ever-growing list of interpretations of rules that would, somehow, bring back the good old days. And along comes Jesus.

Now to set the context, by the time we get to today's story, Jesus has been wrecking merry old chaos: a triumphant entrance to the holy city, a made-for-Hollywood scene where He entered the temple and turned over some tables, and trashed some cheats livelihood and called people names.

That's not the way things were done in the good old days!

So, when the temple leadership, the chief priests and the elders come up and ask him the questions, "by whose authority are you doing these things?" we can understand their point of view. They just spent the night picking up the temple, sweeping up the turtle dove "offerings" that could be found almost everywhere after their cages were broken open and then nested in the rafters.

I mean, I get it! If someone did that here, OUR Building Committee would sure want to know who gave them permission to walk in here, move around the pews and leave a big mess! Change is bad enough as a challenge to nostalgia, but this kind of change?

But change is coming, it's simply that the religious leaders don't see it yet. This is NOT a return to the "good-old-days". Far from it. This is a marching forward to the "yet-to-come". Just like the Israelites in the Exodus had to move forward or die, so, too, did the people seeking faith in Jesus' day. There were no good old days, there was only stagnation.

That is what confronted the leaders and that is what prompted their questions: powerful questions about identity, authority, kingdom.

And they are tricky questions: If Jesus answers, "God has given Me all authority" they can get Him on blasphemy charges. If Jesus responds, "I am my own authority" they can dismiss Him as a crackpot, like all the others.

Both of those answers would be true, of course, but the religious leaders wouldn't see that. Why? Because, in part, they were holding on to the "good-old days" of how faith was "supposed" to be.

And Jesus' continuing conflict with the temple leaders will lead Him straight to the cross. They will kill Him before they change their minds. Because that is EXACTLY what He is asking them to do. Change their minds, reconsider what they thought to be true, and believe that God is working for the repentance, for the renewal, of the entire world in a new and dramatic way.

Now here is where today's lesson gets tricky: Jesus criticizes the leaders for not changing their minds when presented with the message of John and when presented with the person of Jesus. And, looking back, we know they were wrong. But they thought they were being faithful Jews. They thought they were upholding traditions. They believed they were doing things the way they had always been done.

This is tricky because they know, even as we know, not all change is good. We aren't called to follow every new thing that is out there. But we ARE called to change our minds when God sends prophets to lead us on the path of righteousness. We ARE called to change our minds when God sends God's own Son to live among us and teach us what true, sacrificial love looks like.

This gets tricky because we have to determine between the lure of the good-old-days and the change represented by the future. There will always be those who will call us to the past. And sometimes, if the past wasn't too bad, it seems preferable to the present and much less scary than the future.

The Israelites got that. They were ready to head back to Pharaoh and say something like, "Our bad, just kidding, let us get back to work, OK?" But no, it's NOT OK. Some decisions change your life forever.

Jesus was trying to get the religious leaders and His own followers to understand just that...what was happening would change their lives and the lives of the people of the world, forever. There WAS no going back, there was no standing still. You had to decide: trust in God's providence or seek the imagined safety of what has been.

The same choices face us today. There is no going back. We are not equipped to return to the "golden days". They weren't all that golden and we couldn't get there anyway.

We ARE equipped to encounter the world around us.

We ARE equipped to be the co-creators that we were created to be.

We ARE equipped to face whatever the future holds as we grow into our faith.

But it involves change. And it involves faith. And that can be scary, very, very scary. We can't go back. We can't stay here. The way forward depends on the very words and presence of the living God. Do we dare?

This week as your life unfolds, try this: Ask yourself if there are places where you are being called to change your mind, maybe even change your life. Is God asking you to see the world differently?