

The seductive ways of Nostalgia
October 1, 2023
Exodus 17:1-7
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As fall begins and we see the crops harvested, the cooling season and the end of summer we naturally turn our hearts toward thankfulness of all sorts. I thought it would be a good time to focus on gratitude as a spiritual practice and its benefits. Being grateful and giving thanks is not just something we do in the fall, having a heart full of gratitude really is a way of life. It is looking for the best in things rather than the worst. It elicits feelings of contentment and peace and helps us seek out God working in our lives and celebrating God's goodness.

So if gratitude is an important aspect of a healthy spiritual life, what are the things that happen in our lives that prevent us from living in a spirit of gratitude? That is what we want to explore a bit in this series called the Enemies of Gratitude¹.

Today we are going back to the Old Testament to see how a lack of ongoing gratitude and devotion to God kept the Israelites from entering the promised land for a whole generation.

Let me first give you a short recap on why the Israelites need to be delivered from captivity in Egypt.

Jacob also known as Israel and the family moved to Egypt during a terrible famine because Egypt has grain. Joseph is there and invites them. They grow over time and are become known as the Israelites, the descendants of Israel i.e. Jacob. But generations later the Egyptians began to subjugate the Israelite people and made them slave laborers. The Torah.com website says that some scholars think it was about 430 years while others say it was closer to half that. Either way 200+ years is a long time.

As their plight worsens, the Israelites pray for a deliverer. The book of Exodus starts with the story of Moses who is chosen by God's to lead the Israelites out of Egypt after

several confrontations with Pharaoh. They leave Egypt with about fifteen days ration and when that runs out, they turn to Moses and complain. God answers by sending them manna and quail every day. Now in today's reading they are faced with a water shortage and again the people panic and complain to Moses.

The story of the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage into the promise land and freedom as their own people is a story of salvation, of deliverance is a universal story we all seek. Deliverance does not happen overnight. It takes time and it is often a long and difficult journey of faith. For the Israelites they had been praying for deliverance for generations. Those who were brought out of Egypt had never known what freedom was. They had been fully indoctrinated by the ways of Egypt. It is an important step that they go through is desert period to unlearn the things of Egypt and learn the faith of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Each new obstacle or challenge they faced brought out the old mindset and revealed their dependence upon their oppressors. In their anxiety, they begin to blame Moses. In today's reading we see three things that the Israelites turn to instead of gratitude and recognizing how caring and trustworthy God is. Gratitude is an act of worship and of faith in God.

As we look at their many complaints, they first question why they left Egypt. They are looking back to a false sense of security. In Chapter 16 they complained and say this, "In Egypt we sat at flesh pots and ate our fill of bread." (ex. 16:3) Again here they remember that they had water, but in so doing they were also neglected to remember the bad things that caused them to cry out for deliverance in the first place.

That is the dangerous thing about Nostalgia. When we are discontented with our lives today, when we cannot find the good in today, we look to the past for refuge and comfort, but it is a distorted memory. For the Israelites, God was providing for them all along, every day. Yet when any ounce of uncertainty came, they wanted to return to the

old ways of doing things. But that false sense of security came with oppression. They refused to see how God was at work with them in the present.

They also become suspicious of anything new. When God said he would send manna the people were unfamiliar with this food from heaven. When the manna came the people looked at it and asked, “what is it?” That is what the word Manna means. When we turn to nostalgia we lift and celebrate the past, but it is selective memory often. For example, southern cooking includes things like pigs feet or chitlin or grits, but historically many of these food items are the foods slaves ate. The scraps from the masters’ table.

The third thing that is happening is they are not able to trust God or Moses. They are suspicious of their motives, wondering if they lured the Israelites out into the desert to kill them. The deceptive nature of nostalgia can keep us from stepping into a new reality. For the Israelites it kept them from being open to the ways that God was at work in their lives in new and liberating ways. The person sent to lead them to the promised land is someone the people hesitate to trust and someone they are more inclined to oppose than trust and believe. Again causing more strife and resistance.

Yet they needed the wilderness to unlearn the ways of Egypt and to grow in trust and loyalty to God and God’s daily care for them. They first needed to know that God was there for them, before they could begin to form a new society, free of the oppressive ways of the Egyptians.

Rev. Brian Erickson of Trinity Baptist in Birmingham Alabama in his commentary on this passage said,

“Nostalgia never leads you forward, because nostalgia casts an impossible standard—a candy-coated, much-improved rendering of what once was. Nostalgia is Egypt 2.0, with the warts and the thorns removed. The present can

never match an idealized past, leaving us stuck in the quicksand of our edited memories, perpetually ungrateful for the place we now find ourselves.”

When we are stepping into God’s path of deliverance, it is not enough to just physically step out, we also need to shift our thinking and shift our allegiance and trust to God and God alone. We need to trust that the momentary uncertainty is in God’s hands. We need to remember the amazing and new ways that God is showing up for us every day. God’s daily provision needs to be received with grateful hearts. And finally we need to proclaim the goodness of the lord as we put our trust, hope and gratitude in God new every morning.

So let us stay present and seeking to identify the many ways that God is with us today. God’s blessings, like Manna, comes new every morning, let us gather those blessing with grateful hearts as we seek to follow in the new paths of righteousness God is leading us. We are not that same people we were even just a few years ago, let alone thirty or forty years ago. Times have changed. We have changed. The world has changed, and God is the great I am, always present in the time of need. Let us seek our daily manna, our daily bread in Christ with joyful hearts of praise.

Let us thirst for the living streams of God we find here today, rather than the stagnate waters of the past that have all but dried up.

1 Enemies of Gratitude Series by Brian Ericksen. Jessica Miller Kelley, ed., A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C, First edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 65–73.