

“Food for Forty Years”

Exodus 16:1-15

15th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

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I found myself in a strange situation this past week.

I chose our text for today back in May, when I was making selections for our fall sermon series on the Exodus. But when I looked at the text again this past week, I found myself wishing I had not chosen this text.

Don't get me wrong.

It's a fine text.

Nothing wrong with the text.

What bothered me was not so much the feeling that I didn't want to preach on this text.

What bothered me was that I didn't know why.

Why was I reluctant to preach on this text?

So I got to thinking that maybe you could help this morning.

Would you be willing help me figure out why I was hesitant to take up this text?

Our text begins with a new chapter for the Israelites.

No longer living as slaves in Egypt, they find themselves free in the wilderness.

And what's the first thing they do in the wilderness?

They complain.

“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Stop right there.

It's tempting to sit in judgment of the Israelites.

To point a finger at the Israelites.

To suggest that if it were us, WE would be rejoicing!

How could they complain so quickly?

But may I suggest that we know more about their response than we think we do? After all, the Israelites are trying to let go of a life that they used to know.

Have you ever been there?

I don't mean have you ever been captive to Pharaoh.

I mean have you ever had to let go...of a life you used to know?

Maybe that's the reason I didn't want to preach on this text.

You see, the Israelites are in the midst of an ending. And even when it's the right ending, or a good ending, that doesn't mean that endings are always easy.

I've told you plenty of times about the difficulties we sometimes have with our dog. About how we try to avoid particular situations that would put our dog in a place where she exercises her worst habits.

For example, for some reason, when we're on a walk, she goes beserk if she sees a golf cart. It doesn't matter who's in the golf cart, or how fast it's going...she barks like crazy at golf carts.

So...if we're taking her for a walk, and we see a golf cart on the road ahead of us, what do we do?

We try to duck into the nearest driveway so that she'll get distracted by something else and won't be able to see it.

Same principle applies when we have our house cleaned. Even if we put her in her own room in the house, she will bark up a storm when our cleaners come to clean the house. So, we take her to doggie-day care on days when our house gets cleaned.

The people at doggie day care are familiar with us.
They're familiar with our dog, they're very patient with our dog.
For reasons that remain mysterious, they actually seem to LIKE our dog!

So one day this summer, I went to pick up our dog.
I said to the young woman working behind the counter:
"I'm here to get Ruthie!"

And she looked at me funny.
So I reminded her of my name, and I said, "You know...Ruthie?"
And the woman behind the counter said, "Mr. Dorr, I remember you. Do you mean your dog Pepper?"

And I said, "Yes. Thank you. I'm so sorry. Ruthie was the name of our previous dog."

(In case you haven't guessed, I LIKED Ruthie more than I like Pepper. Don't tell Pepper that!)

Ruthie, our other dog—um, she died in the summer of 2019.
And this past summer, I said, I'm here to pick up Ruthie.
Do you see what I'm talking about?

Endings...how we handle them, what we do with them...moving from a life we used to know to a life we have yet to know...it's not always easy.

**Maybe that's why I didn't want to preach on this text.
Or maybe the reason...is what comes after the ending.**

You see, this morning's text is not just about an ending in the life of Israel.

It's also about an "in-between" time in the life of Israel.
No longer in Egypt.
Not yet in the Promised Land.

It's a liminal time.
A transitional time.
A time of uncertainty for the Israelites.

They don't know how long they will be in the wilderness.
They don't even know how they're going to eat in the wilderness.

So God tells Moses that God will send the Israelites manna.
Bread from heaven.
Which gives them what they need to survive.

But it also gives them more than that.
Do you know what manna means in Hebrew?

Manna means: "What is it?"

At one level, the Israelites discover this fine, flaky bread on ground in the morning, and they remark that they've never seen anything like it before.

So they ask one another, "What is it?"

But on another level, God isn't just feeding them with bread.
God is feeding the Israelites with a question.

Think about this.
Uncertainty surrounds them.
They have no idea what their new life has in store for them.

And instead of giving the Israelites a five-point plan...
Instead of providing the Israelites with a revelation that says:
this is what it all means...

Instead of feeding the Israelites with answers,
God feeds them with a question.

It's a question that arrives as God's gift, every single day:

What is it?

As our former Heritage lecturer, Dr. Craig Barnes, points out,
that's not just a question about the bread.

It's a question about God.
It's a question about what God is doing in their midst.¹

What is it that God is doing in the lives of the Israelites, now that
God has freed them from the clutches of Pharaoh?

In this liminal time,
this in-between time,
what is it that God is asking of them?

¹ Dr. Barnes preached on this text at a Festival of Homiletics conference many years ago, which is where I first heard this point made about the meaning of the word "manna".

Maybe that's the reason I didn't want to preach on this text.

Because that's not just a question for the Israelites.
That's a question for you and for me.

What is it that God is doing in your life right now?
What is it that God is asking from you right now?

What are the ways God is asking you to love the stranger, to
forgive 70x7, to carry your neighbor's cross?

You see, it's a question that demands something of us.
I'd much rather check the Yankees score first thing in the morning
than ask myself that question.

What is it that God is up to in your life today?

A retired colleague of mine was talking earlier this spring about
how his grown children were trying to convince him and his wife to
move closer to them.

This colleague and his wife—they're grandparents, and for over 20
years, their home has been a wonderful place where their grandkids have
spent many a summer day, as they grew from toddlers to teenagers to
adults.

But now that chapter of my colleague's life...it was coming to an
end.

They decided their kids were right.
They decided it was time to leave the house they loved.
Time to make a move, to be closer to their adult children, hundreds
of miles from their beloved home.

And I could hear the faithfulness in their decision.
 And I could hear the struggle that went into their decision.

And I could hear the question behind their decision:
 God, this feels like the right thing to do.
 But God, what are you up to?
 What is it?

In Sue Monk Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, part of the story revolves around a group of sisters, who have a honey-making business in a small town outside of Columbia, South Carolina. The three sisters are all named after the warmer months.

August is the matriarch. May is the most in need.

One day, these wonderful women welcome into their home a fourteen-year-old runaway named Lily.

The house into which they welcome her stands out in this small town...not just because of the honey business that they run.

It also stands out because it's painted pink.
 One day Lily asks August about it.

"How come, if your favorite color is blue, you painted your house so pink?"

August laughed.

"That was May's doing. She was with me the day I went to the paint store to pick out the color. I had a nice tan color in mind, but May latched on to this sample called Caribbean Pink. She said it made her feel like dancing a Spanish flamenco."

“I thought, ‘Well, this is the tackiest color I’ve ever seen, and we’ll have half the town talking about us, but if it can lift May’s heart like that, I guess she ought to live inside it.’”

“All this time I just figured you liked pink,” Lily said.

August laughed again. “You know, some things don’t matter that much, Lily. Like the color of a house. How big is that in the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person’s heart — now, that matters. The whole problem with people is ...”

And Lily interrupts: “They don’t know what matters and what doesn’t.”

August replies: “I was gonna say, the problem is they know what matters, but they don’t choose it. ... I love May, but it was still so hard to choose Caribbean Pink. The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.”²

I think August was right.
The hardest thing isn’t knowing what matters.
The hardest thing is choosing it.

Choosing, every day, to love like Jesus loved, to forgive like Jesus forgave, to welcome like Jesus welcomed, to reach out to the vulnerable like Jesus reached out to the vulnerable.

And that’s why something curious happened to me, along the way of preaching this sermon this morning.

² Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Penguin Books, 2002. I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Tom Are, “Pardon for a Necessary Compromise,” November 19, 2023, preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, for calling my attention to this reference.

What happened is that I've changed my mind about this text.
 Why did I change my mind?
 Because of you.

I get to choose to do what matters most...
 and to determine the kind of things that matter...
 with all of you.

Like the Israelites of old, we do not make our way through the wilderness...all by ourselves.

We get to make our way through...with one another.
 And we NEED each other.

We need one another's grace,
 and hope, and wisdom, and faith,
 and forgiveness, and love...
 and so do our neighbors.

So that they might know, through ways we treat our neighbors, that they too are a beloved and cherished child of God.

Back when our family was living in Dallas, a new U.S. citizen and a resident of Dallas wrote a letter to the *Dallas Morning News*.

His name was Rais Bhuiyan.
 Rais is originally from Bangladesh.
 He came to the United States in the summer of 2001.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a man named Mark Stroman walked into the mini-mart gas station at which Rais was working. Stroman wanted revenge for the 9/11 attacks. He was intent

on killing anyone whom he thought might be “Arab,” and he shot Rais Bhuiyan.

But not just Rais.

Mark Stroman also managed to shoot and kill two other Muslims at two other stores before he was arrested, convicted, and put on death row.

Miraculously, Rais survived the attack, and decided that he wanted to continue to live in Dallas, to keep going on with his life in his new home.

Fast forward 10 years.

Stroman’s execution date was nearing—it was set to occur in the summer of 2011. In the spring of that year, Rais Bhuiyan sent a letter to the newspaper:

“Why My Attacker Should Be Spared the Death Penalty”³

“[I feel this way],” Rais wrote, “because of what I learned from my parents.”

“They raised me with the religious principle that he is best who can forgive easily. The second [reason I feel this way] is because of what I believe as a Muslim, that human lives are precious and that no one has the right to take another’s life. In my faith, forgiveness is the best policy, and Islam doesn’t allow for hate and killing.”

Bhuiyan’s fight to save his would-be killer was unsuccessful. And Mark Stroman was executed that summer.

³ Anand Giridharadas, *The True American: Murder and Mercy in Texas*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014. Portions of this story are also taken from an interview of Rais Bhuiyan, found on YouTube, Connecticut Public Podcasts, September 9, 2016.

But shortly after the execution, a surprising thing happened.
 Bhuiyan received an email from Mark's children.
 They wanted to meet him.
 He said, absolutely.

When they got together, Stroman's daughter said, "Can I touch you? I want to feel that you are a human being."

Bhuiyan replied, "How about I give you a hug?"

And Stroman's daughter started crying, right on the spot.

She said, "I never even believed that you would come to meet us, and now I'm giving you a hug. I'm so sorry what my father did to you."

Bhuiyan said to her, "Look, you lost your father. But now you have an uncle. If there's anything I can do to help, to support, I'm always there."

The hardest thing to do is choosing what matters.
 And what matters most is lifting our neighbor's heart.

It's why I changed my mind about preaching today's text.

Because I get to be part of a faith community that is always committed to lifting up our neighbor's heart.

In fact, I believe I belong to a faith community that's so committed to loving our neighbor and to lifting our neighbor's heart, I believe that each and every one of you *would even choose to paint your house Caribbean pink*, if that's the color that will lift our neighbor's heart.

Am I right about that?

Ah...it's ok.

You don't have to answer that.

I don't imagine you or I have any neighbors whose heart will be lifted if we paint our houses Caribbean pink!

But what do you think would lift your neighbor's heart?

If God were asking you to do something not in your own interests, but in the interests of your neighbor...something that truly matters and that would lift your neighbor's heart....

what is it?

(Amen.)