

From Testing to Trusting

Exodus 17:1-7

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“The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded.” The phrase traveling from place to place is translated in the New King James Version in this way: “They set out on their journey.” In the New Revised Standard Version, we read, “They journeyed by stages.” The point in the passage remains pretty much the same regardless of the translation. Traveling from place to place on a journey, a journey broken up into stages, the Israelites are going from Point A to Point B, with Point B being the Promised Land.

Even though the translations are saying the same thing in different words, something about the phrase, “They journeyed by stages” caught my attention. The phrase, “By stages” made me wonder if the journey was not simply meant to be a matter of moving from Point A to Point B, but also a matter of maturing as they moved along on their journey. Could it be the journey in the wilderness was also a journey of faith? And if that is a possibility, what might it look like to mature in faith?

Sometime in my years in the education system I encountered numerous studies that examined growing by stages. Erik Erikson believed there were stages of development...stages marked by Hope, Will, Purpose, Competence, Fidelity, Love, Care, and Wisdom. Lawrence Kohlberg identified stages of Moral Development. Piaget had a theory of Cognitive Development, Abraham Maslow had a hierarchy of needs, and Freud saw stages of psychosexual development, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is well-known for identifying five stages of grief. It is not unusual to look for stages of development in numerous aspects of our lives as human beings. Could the desert, could the wilderness, could the wanderings in the wilderness provide Israel with an opportunity to grow by stages in their life of faith?

I sure hope so! Exodus 17 marks the third stop on their wanderings in the wilderness. Exodus 17 is the third stage of their journey. The people are moving from place to place, journeying by stages. But their faith seems stuck in a terrible stage that is marked by grumbling, complaining, and quarreling. Israel might have arrived at the third stop on their physical journey, but in terms of the stage of their faith journey, their spiritual journey seems stuck in stage two, as in the terrible twos. Here is what has happened so far.

Stage 1: “Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah...Marah means bitter). So, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’” (Exodus 16:22-24) Even though the miracle of the Red Sea is only weeks old, they seem to have completely forgotten God’s ability to deliver, to provide, to lead, and to guide. They come to bitter water and they grumble. They are in Stage 1 of their physical journey, but their beginning stage on their spiritual journey is nothing but the terrible twos.

Stage 2: “The whole Israelite community set out and came to the Desert of Sin...In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the good food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death.’” In their spiritual memory they now have the Red Sea and the bitter waters that have been made into sweet water, and yet...their faith journey is stuck in the exact same place, the same stage of development, the terrible twos.

Stage 3: “The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling by stages. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So, they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?’ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’” (Exodus 17:1-3) Stage 3 of their journey, both their physical and their spiritual journey, became a notorious stop on their journey, a notorious stage of their development. The quarreling, the testing, and the grumbling left such a mark on the people that by the time they moved on from Stage 3 of their journey, that notorious place carried a name that would live on in infamy. Moses named the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord. Massah means testing and Meribah means quarreling. Stage 3 of their physical journey is now completed, and they move on. Stage 3 of their spiritual journey is completed, and they do not seem to have moved on one single bit. They are still in their terrible twos. They are not moving toward spiritual maturity.

Numbers chapter 33 bears the title “Stages in Israel’s Journey”. Numbers 33 recounts the stages in Israel’s physical journey. Unfortunately, as the stages are recounted, and as we look back on the forty years the people wandered in the wilderness, while their physical journey led them to the brink of the Promised Land, their spiritual journey, the stages of their spiritual journey, seemed always to lurk right around the brink of disaster. Israel seemed perpetually stuck in their terrible two stage.

The stages Erik Erikson identified for development were Hope, Will, Purpose, Competence, Fidelity, Love, Care, and Wisdom. For Israel the stages of their lack of spiritual development were grumbling, complaining, quarreling, testing, worshipping a golden calf, craving, opposing, rebelling, and insolence. Their physical journey took them from stage to stage until they stood at the brink of the Promised Land. The stages of their spiritual journey seemed to take them nowhere. They were stuck in a perpetual spiritual stage that had an awful lot in common with the terrible twos. Grumbling, complaining, quarreling...all of it captured in the notorious names that were given in Exodus 17, Massah and Meribah.

Those very names Massah and Meribah also invite us to explore an example of the faith of Israel experiencing the very thing we long to find. Massah and Meribah are used in a prayer, in a psalm, in a statement that demonstrates a rich and wonderful faith that has moved far beyond what we might call the stage of the terrible twos. Psalm 95, the passage we read earlier in our worship service, is a testimony not of being stuck in the terrible twos, but rather this is a prayer from one who has moved far beyond testing to trusting.

Singing with joy to the Lord, shouting to the Rock of our salvation, coming before the Lord with thanksgiving, extolling the Lord who is the great God and King, the psalmist prays, "Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care." Just how far faith has come from the terrible twos of the wilderness journey is made clear by the closing words of the psalm.

"Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your heart as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did." I called the stage of faith marked by the grumbling and complaining in the desert the terrible twos. The psalmist calls it the stage of the hard heart. The blessings of God are met with testing and grumbling. The faithfulness of God is met with opposition and insolence. The love of God is met with a hard heart. But the psalm shows that as humans, as children of God, we can move from a hard heart that tests, to a soft and gentle heart that trusts.

I had a good friend named Charles who trusted the Lord. I'm not sure how he moved through whatever stages of faith he moved through to get to the point where he trusted the Lord, but he did. Charles trusted the Lord. Charles was part of a men's group that met every Tuesday at our church in Houston. Charles was there every Tuesday. To move through the stages of spiritual maturity can be a tricky process. Charles did not have a college degree. Sometimes he let that get him down, as if he was not qualified to speak on the same level as someone who had a diploma. But Charles was wrong. He might not have passed the stage where you get a college

degree, but he had most definitely passed the stage when he leaned on the Lord and did not trust in his own understanding. And whenever Charles would hint that not having a college degree held him back a bit, I would remind him that he was one of the best people I had ever met at memorizing scripture. Lord, that man was a walking and talking fountain of scripture.

I never prayed the 23rd Psalm alone when Charles was with me. He knew every word by heart. He knew all the old hymns and he could turn a hymn into a prayer like nobody's business. As much as Charles loved the 23rd Psalm, his favorite passage of scripture came from the prophet Habakkuk. Way at the end of that little oracle that the prophet Habakkuk received from the Lord, after the prophetic words that tell us that even though the revelation of the Lord tarries, even if it tarries we need to wait for that word from the Lord...and after those words that Paul grabbed hold of to launch his epic epistle to the Romans, those words that the righteous will live by faith...way at the end of that little oracle that the prophet Habakkuk received from the Lord is a testimony to faith. Charles knew the words at the end of Habakkuk by heart. "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will be joyful in God my Savior." (Habakkuk 3:17, 18)

Charles knew those words by heart. He would often say them to draw one of our Tuesday lessons to a close. When a beloved member was sick or even more so, when a member of our group had died, I knew I could count on Charles to remind us that though the fig tree does not bud...When we met after September 11, 2001, during that dark time when fear was so real and suffering so great, there was Charles calling us to trust in the Lord as he said, "and there are no grapes on the vine." When the wars started in Afghanistan and Iraq and we were getting caught up in conflicts that still have not come to an end, the voice of Charles boldly proclaimed "Though the olive crops fail and the fields produce no food..." Even when his son Bill got sick and was in the hospital, sure enough there was Charles, "though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall..." Through it all, Charles was not just trusting God, he was teaching us to trust God. He was teaching me to trust God. Then his son Bill did not get better. Then Bill died.

The next Tuesday Charles was back with the group. Class came to a close and I waited to hear him pray his prayer. Charles was quiet that morning, and the next, and the next. After a while I stopped waiting for Charles to pray his prayer. Grief is a hard thing. It can pierce the heart of even the most faithful servant. Charles stopped saying his prayer, but to his credit, he did not stop coming. Time went by. Several months later we were meeting. We had a good discussion. We got ready to close in prayer. I had all the men bow their heads. Before I could say a word I heard a voice...it was a voice that had been silent a long time...it was a voice we needed to

hear...it was the voice that spoke when many of our friends had been sick or dying, when planes crashed into the World Trade Towers, when men and women went off to war...and many did not come back. That morning I heard a voice I needed to hear. I heard the voice of my dear friend Charles. Charles had been on a long walk through the valley of the shadow of death. When Charles spoke that morning, we knew that sure enough the Lord had been with him as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Now Charles was ready to speak again. I had the men close their eyes and bow their heads and my dear friend Charles said, like he had said so many times before, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

Today I am preaching the sermon I intended to preach on Sunday, March 15, 2020. But the Coronavirus halted us. At the very beginning of the Coronavirus Crisis I wanted to say to you these words: "This Coronavirus is upon us and we will have to make our way through it, hopefully together, as a church, as a community, as a nation, and as a world. Hopefully, we will remember we are all in this together, as we make our way through this stage of the journey. But remember, this is also a stage in our faith journey. This Coronavirus stage of our faith could be Massah and Meribah. It is going to be real tempting to forget to look in our rearview mirror and see all God has done for us. It is going to be very tempting to grumble, to quarrel, to complain, and to test God. Maybe we have to go through that stage of faith. Israel sure did."

I wanted to tell you back then...

I believe this stage in our journey of faith will not be like Massah and Meribah. From what I know about you, the people who make up this congregation, this community of faith, I believe this will be a time when we choose to trust God. That is just who you are. That is just who we are. I believe when you hear the psalmist say, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts like they did at Massah and Meribah", I believe you will not harden your hearts toward God. I believe you will not test God. I believe you will trust God. I believe you will be like Charles, my dear friend, who experienced some real challenges, some real struggles, some real disappointments, and yet through it all he knew his Lord was his shepherd, holding him close and keeping him safe, guiding and directing, blessing and protecting. I believe you will be like my good friend Charles, that dear man of faith, who held onto God in

the most difficult of times, and made his life verse those precious words from an Old Testament prophet with the funny name of Habakkuk.

“Though the fig tree does not bud...

And there are no grapes on the vines...

Though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food...

Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

I believed that about you then on March 15, 2020. I believe that about you now, on June 21, 2020. Friends, I have no reason to doubt that I will believe that about you every stage of the spiritual journey we share together.

We can choose to test God. We can live in that stage of faith that is known as Massah and Meribah. But God’s desire is to move us to a better stage in our journey of faith to a more mature stage in our faith journey. Today, our God, our loving and caring, our kind and compassionate God is moving us from the stage of testing to the stage of trusting. Dear friends, come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. He is our God and we are the people of his pasture. We are his flock, and he will always surround us with his love and with his care. Amen.