

“Moses: It is hard to lead a people forward when they keep looking back”

Exodus 16:1-3

Wayne Eberly

January 24, 2021

Israel was at a particularly vulnerable point in their spiritual journey. About a month and a half ago they had busted out of Egypt, waltzing right through the waters of the Red Sea. The waters of that Red Sea had been piled high on both sides, leaving the Israelites a path of dry ground that was absolutely ideal for some serious dancing and celebrating. Saying goodbye to Egypt, they were literally free at last. And they thanked God Almighty that they were free at last, with a song by Moses and some righteous tambourine shaking from his sister Miriam. Imagine a chorus that was some 600,000 strong lifting their voices in perfect harmony, “Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.” (Exodus 15:22)

But now Israel was forty-five days or so into this experiment with freedom. They were not empty-handed on their journey, as by an act of God the Egyptians had been made “favorably disposed” toward the Israelites and sent them off on their journey well-supplied with articles of silver and gold for clothing. They had even made a recent stop at an oasis, where they enjoyed fresh water from twelve springs and the succulent fruit of seventy palm trees. While we might be tempted to think that Israel was all set for a successful journey to the Promised Land, emboldened by the dramatic events of the Red Sea, refreshed by the waters and flavorful fruit at the oasis, and still marveling at the plagues that so vividly displayed God’s mighty power, what we discover is that for all the things God had done for the Israelites, he had forgotten to include one very important, necessary, and vital ingredient for them to have a successful journey. There is so much God had remembered. God remembered...

- To ignite the burning bush
- To see the suffering of the Israelites
- To hear their cries

- To be concerned
- To come down and help
- To send Moses and Aaron to tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go!”

There is so much God had remembered. God remembered each of the plagues and the displays of power...

- The staff became a snake
- The waters of the Nile turned to blood
- The frogs, the gnats, the flies...check, check, check
- The plague on the livestock, the plague of boils, the plague of hail, the plague of locusts, the plague of darkness, and ultimately, the plague on the firstborn.

God remembered the Passover...God remembered the plunder...God remembered to part the waters of the Red Sea. This Exodus was planned down to the finest detail and everything was working perfectly. Some half a million people were poised to cross the desert sands and enter the chosen land.

And yet there was one thing God forgot. I don't know if it occurred to someone on day one, day two, day twenty or day forty, but by day forty-five, the problem had become glaring. God forgot one important thing. God forgot to bring along the food. For a month and a half the people had cut God some slack. But you go forty-five days with no food and tell me how you feel. They had been extremely patient with God. But by day forty-five their patience had run out. They began to grumble.

Now to be clear, they had every right to grumble. God had dropped the ball. The Israelites had a legitimate beef...in that there was no beef. And there was no sign of food anywhere on the horizon. They looked left, they looked right, and whether looking left or looking right there was absolutely no food in sight. They looked straight ahead and there was not even a glimmer of dessert...just a vast and empty food desert. Everywhere they looked, in every direction they looked, there was no food.

Well, that is not entirely true. In one direction there was food. It wasn't looking to the left. It wasn't looking to the right. It wasn't looking straight ahead. But if they looked back, they saw food. If they looked back to Egypt, they saw not just meager crumbs, they saw an abundance of food. Listen to what they said. "In Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted." Oh, Egypt, now those people in Egypt, they knew how to set the table.

Friends, let me say it again. Israel was at a particularly vulnerable point in their spiritual journey. They were looking back. The reason they were looking back makes perfect sense. They had no food. Egypt had food. If you have no food, you look to where there is food. As best they could tell, the only place there was food was back in Egypt. But to turn back to Egypt was to turn away from God. God was not going back to Egypt. God was going forward. God was leading the Israelites forward. God was leading the people to the Promised Land. No matter how hungry they were, no matter how much sense it made to them or to us, no matter how much we can relate to their dilemma, even if the Israelites are, as our daughter puts it so well, even if the Israelites are "Hangry" (A combustible combination of hunger and anger), even if the Israelites are hangry, to turn back was to turn away from God.

As Israel grumbles in the desert, as Israel longs for the good old days when they had three squares in the kitchens of Egypt, when they were living high on the hog surrounded by pots with plenty of meat, it seems that this particularly vulnerable point in their spiritual journey is not really about their stomachs. God does not glorify hunger. God provides for hunger. We see that in no uncertain terms in the events that unfold in the remainder of Exodus chapter 16. This is the very chapter when God provides manna in the morning and a plentiful supply of quail each night. God cares about our physical needs. Because hunger is a real and necessary human need, God cares about hunger. God cares about our stomach.

God's concern for human hunger is evidenced by God providing enough for everyone as they journey through the desert. In God's divine provision there is equity in the desert. Everyone has enough. It will be only a few chapters later when God adds to the provision of daily bread the provision of his divine word, the laws of the covenant that will shape and guide the people of God not only in the desert but when they settle in the Promised Land. God will establish safeguards to ensure that those who are vulnerable have enough to eat even after their days in the desert. Commands about gleaning are designed to meet the needs of those who live on the margins. Leave some grain at the edge of your field. Leave some grapes as you harvest your vineyard. Leave some, so those who are without can experience some relief for the terrible pangs of hunger. Over and over again God will command his people to take special care of the poor, of the widow, the orphan, and the alien. When God commands the people to bring the firstfruits of their offerings and the tithes of their produce the firstfruits and tithes are meant to be for those who are vulnerable. Although God can hardly imagine that poor people would exist in this marvelous land he is giving his people, God does not fail to mention that, "If there is a poor person among your brothers...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted...I command you to be openhanded toward the poor and needy in the land." (Deuteronomy 26 and Deuteronomy 15)

The events of Exodus 16 find Israel at a particularly vulnerable point in their spiritual journey, but this story is not about their stomachs. Of course, God cares about their stomachs. But this story is not about their stomachs. This story is about their hearts. Will their hearts be devoted to the God who is leading them forward on their journey? Or will their hearts turn from God and try to grab hold of the known, the past, their life back in Egypt?

One of the dangers of looking back, of trying to grab hold of the past, is that the rearview mirror has the tendency to distort our vision. Here in Exodus 16 Israel looks in the rearview mirror and they see Egypt as a place of feasting on the finest food. But if we have read the Exodus story, that is not the Egypt we know. The Egypt we know, the Egypt described in

the first chapter of Exodus, was a place where the Israelites were subjected to slave masters, a place of oppression, a place where they were treated ruthlessly, a place where life was bitter, and a place where the life of the Israelite boys was cheap. Kill them when they are born. Throw them in the water to drown. That was Egypt. And yet somehow now, faced with a lack of food, overcome with “hanger”, that angry hunger that lets the stomach guide our behavior, now Egypt looks like such a great place. Let’s turn around. Let’s go back. At least there we had plenty of meat.

And even if the past really was a good thing, the danger is just as real. In looking back, in turning back, in trying to grab hold of a previous time and place and pattern of living, we can find ourselves trying to hold on to the past. When we do that, we end up holding on to the past rather than holding on to God.

In Exodus 16 we discover that even though there are times in life when it looks like God has forgotten something really important, in this case the food for the journey, our God is not a God who forgets. In Exodus 16 we make the wonderful discovery that God has not forgotten the need for food. But wait a minute, we know the food is not coming from Egypt. We’re not going back there. Fine. But we looked straight ahead. We looked left. We looked right. All we see is desert. There is absolutely no food in sight.

Israel checked the supply lines, and they evaluated the situation correctly. There was a supply line going back but going back was not the right choice. What Israel discovered in the wilderness is that just because straight ahead or to the left or to the right they saw no supply of food in sight, they had not checked all the supply lines. Look up Israel. Look up. Check that supply line, the supply line that comes directly from God. Yes, the desert has no food and no supply lines for food. But that does not mean God does not have a way to supply your needs. Look up. And when Israel looks up, they find that God is sending them bread, bread from heaven. The beautiful phrase “Bread from heaven” is found in Psalm 105, a psalm that recounts the many ways God provided for Israel throughout their

history as the people of God, and in particular how God provided for Israel in the Exodus. “God fed them with the bread of heaven.” There was a supply line they never could have imagined, and it was a supply line better than they could have ever hoped for. That supply line was God, the God who provides all things.

Using the phrase, “Bread from heaven” from Psalm 105 gives me the opportunity to clarify something of great importance. Psalm 105 is a psalm that does the very thing I have been speaking against. Psalm 105 looks back. Over and over again Psalm 105 looks back. When the Israelites look back to Egypt, they are looking back in a way that would take them back, that would lead them backwards, that would lead them away from God. Psalm 105 looks back in a different way. (105:4) Psalm 105 is a psalm that looks back so the people can remember all the things God has done. They remember not for the sake of returning or going back. The psalm itself spells out the reason the people look back, the reason the people remember. They remember so they can “Look to the Lord and his strength...so they can seek his face always.” (Psalm 105:4)

What a difference it would have made in the wilderness, in Exodus 16, if the people had looked back not for the sake of returning to Egypt, but if they had looked back so they could remember. Then all those things I mentioned earlier in this sermon would have been brought to mind.

Remember...

- The Burning Bush
- The Plagues
- The Passover
- The Red Sea

Remember...all that God has done for us to get us to this place. If God has brought us this far...surely we can trust God to provide for us now, even in this seemingly impossible situation of being in the desert with no food. Remember what God has done, so that now, in this time of

crisis...remember so that we look to God, because God is our supply line. That is good looking back. That is good remembering. That is the type of looking back and remembering that causes us to “Look to the Lord and his strength”, the kind of remembering that leads us to “Seek his face always.”

This story about the people of God, the people of Israel, presents a powerful message for us today. Here in the midst of the Coronavirus, we are at a particularly vulnerable time in our spiritual journey. People are worn out. People are lonely. People are discouraged. People are disheartened. People are angry. People are out of work. People are frustrated. People are sick. People are dying. Israel grumbled in their wilderness. Israel looked back as if returning to Egypt would solve their problems. We are in the wilderness. I’m quite sure we have all been tempted to look back, to long for the good old days, pre-Coronavirus.

I hope we can understand the good news that comes to us in Exodus chapter 16, a chapter that begins with grumbling. I hope we can understand the good news that comes to us in Exodus 16, a chapter that turns backward and takes a longing look at the past. I hope we can understand the good news that comes to us in Exodus 16 because it is the type of news that can sustain us during our own journey through the wilderness of something as devastating and disrupting as the Coronavirus.

Look back...people of God, look back. Look back not with the intention of returning or trying to recapture a little of the glory days. No, that is not why we look back. Look back so that we can remember all that God has done to get us to this place. Look back and remember all the awesome wonders God did in the Exodus. Look back and remember the days of David and the heroes of old. Look back and remember God’s presence in the fiery furnace and the lion’s den. Look back and remember a cold night in Bethlehem where the Christ child was born in a stable and put down to sleep in a manger. Look back and remember that baby when he grew up, that baby we come to know as Jesus of Nazareth, look back and remember how he calmed the storms and quieted the waves, look back and remember how he healed the sick and comforted the grieving, look

back and remember how he took up the cross of suffering and pain...for us. Look back and remember how his dark and lonely grave was transformed from a tomb of death to a womb of life...resurrection life...everlasting life. Look back and remember how Jesus said, "I will be with you always...even to the end of the age." At this particularly vulnerable time in our journey of faith, look back and remember that we always have a supply line. Look back and remember that we find that supply line by looking up, by looking to God, by trusting God, and by holding fast to God.

As we worship the God who has given us bread from heaven, let us "Look to the Lord and strength; let us seek his face always."