

Proper 20A: 9/20/20  
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“Long journeys in adverse conditions often bring out the worst in people.”  
 I read that in a Bible commentary this week, and it rang true for my life too.

Driving to grandparent's house in Ohio with little kids --  
 as they poke each other and kick the back of your seat.  
 Dashing off for a weekend with long-lost friends when a tire blows out --  
 leaving you stranded in the middle of nowhere.  
 Or, how about another kind of journey –  
 going into quarantine during a pandemic  
 with no real sense of where we're headed or when it'll end?

“Long journeys in adverse conditions often bring out the worst in people.”

That's an observation about today's first reading  
 from the Hebrew Scripture book of Exodus.  
 The name Exodus of course describes the journey of God's people  
 exiting oppression in Egypt to go to the land promised by God.  
 What could possibly be adverse about such a journey?  
 Wouldn't it be more like a parade?

Well, you heard today's reading.  
 A lot more grumbling and grouching than singing and dancing.

Remember, now, how long is that journey in Exodus?  
 Forty years – indicating a time of testing and trial.  
 (We read in the gospel that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days.)  
 But guess where this passage comes in their 40-year journey.  
 They've barely pulled out of the driveway!

In the previous chapter, they really are  
 singing and dancing that the Lord has “triumphed gloriously”.  
 They're singing and dancing that the Lord has heard their groans of misery in Egypt.

But now, just a chapter later, they're grumbling.  
 “Maybe it wasn't so bad after all as slaves in Egypt,” they whine.

I remember how impatient I got with my kids squirming and kicking  
 in the back seat – rather than looking ahead to a visit with family.  
 How upset I was to miss the first night of a weekend with friends --

instead of being relieved that I was safe as my car was fixed.  
So I'm thinking I might not be the happiest camper out there  
in the wilderness with Moses and the gang.

"Long journeys in adverse conditions often bring out the worst in people."

I was taken by that understated description of this Exodus passage  
by Michael Chan of Luther Seminary. (*Exodus16:2-15, workingpreacher.org*)

But of course he didn't stop there because the Exodus story doesn't stop there.

"An important lesson from the wilderness," he continues,  
"is that Israel doesn't travel alone, and neither do we."

Look what happens with the folks enduring the Exodus.  
They swiftly go from groaning in Egypt to grumbling in the wilderness,  
and the Lord hears – and *heeds* – it all.  
The Lord sends them what they need.  
Maybe not everything they want, but enough.  
Enough for their need, if not their greed.  
Enough "manna" for that day. That day alone.  
They couldn't hide or hoard it if they tried.  
But they get plenty for that day, inviting the trust  
that with God there will be plenty enough for the next day too.

One of the hardest aspects of this pandemic, for me,  
has been not feeling free to plan ahead as I'd like.  
I realize I'm in a fortunate position. My family is well.  
Three out of four of us are still employed,  
and we all have a safe, pleasant place to hunker down.  
I hope the same can be said for you.

Still, I find plenty to grumble about.  
Things I used to do as second nature are now so complicated.  
So much is out of our control.  
So far so good with the weather worshipping outside,  
but how long will our luck hold out?  
When will CT move to Reopening Phase 3?  
Or will something happen to shut it all down again?  
What will Christmas look like?  
What will *next week* look like?

We are in the wilderness.  
And an important message about the wilderness we learn from Exodus?  
*Israel doesn't travel alone, and neither do we.*

To the people Israel struggling through their wilderness,  
 the Lord sent sustenance in the form of . . . a question.  
 Yes, it was real bread – *manna* from heaven – because God cares about  
 the physical needs of God’s people.  
 But the word “manna” in Hebrew literally is the question: “What is it?”  
 They’d never seen manna before, and weren’t sure what to do with it.  
 So they said, *What is it?*

Maybe questions can be one of God’s ways of sustaining us through this wilderness.  
 We know that God absolutely, positively did NOT will this pandemic upon us.  
 But now that it’s here, *what is it?*  
 What is it that we need to learn from this experience?  
 What is it that God needs us to do? To be, now?

What our Bishops call the twin pandemic of White Supremacy  
 has come to the fore this year, many would say belatedly.  
 But now that our eyes are beginning to be opened, what is it that we see?  
 What is it that we’ve not seen for too long?  
 What is it that I’ve benefitted from at the expense of people of color  
 and what is it I must do to change and make amends?

Through that long Exodus journey in adverse conditions,  
 the people Israel finally got somewhere.  
 Turns out the journey wasn’t just about getting from Point A to Point B,  
 but being formed into the people God needed them to be.  
 They weren’t the same at the end as they were at the beginning.  
 They weren’t perfect; they were still people, but *God’s people*.  
 People whom God chose to work with and in and through.  
 Even when they fell short (as they often did) their stories inspire us today.

So I’m wondering if I’m supposed to learn to love the questions and uncertainty,  
 to “get comfortable being uncomfortable,”  
 as Frances Chamberlain said in her sermon a few weeks ago.  
 Maybe all my plans never were as certain as I thought they were.  
 What is it, then, that I do with that?  
 What is it that God is trying to tell me,  
 not just for now, but after we come out of this?

That’s some of what I’ve been wrestling with on this long, adverse journey.  
 What about you? What is it for you?

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