

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, God of the past, God of the future, God of the now, we have been your people. We are your people. We want to be your people. Help us to wrestle away from easy answers, easy solutions, easy formulas of faith and to find you consistently, Creator God. You are the Creator of the Universe, and despite the ease in which a life of faith can sound, we often forget that we are dealing with our Creator and the Creator of all we see. We are so small and our personal issues are small in view of the greater world's problems and the entirety of the universe, but you treat all with kindness and respect. We lift up those things on our hearts, those spoken and unspoken, those big and small, to you, God.

You led the Israelites out of slavery and into Your Promises, but they did not always go willingly. They looked at the comfort of predictability as absolute. In the same way, God, we are often afraid to move into the unknown of the future. We love the comfortable and the familiar like the Israelites so long ago. Walk with us, God, to recognize our fear but not to be subverted by it. Help us to understand uncertainty but to know that you are there. Help us to know that you are fully present in the times of certainty and uncertainty to be that loving presence that never wavers. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of certainty and uncertainty, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Feel free to fill in the blank: "Everything was just great when..." There are lots of things with which we can fill that blank. You could say, "Everything was just great when Teddy Roosevelt was in office." Or, "Everything was just great when gas was under a dollar a gallon." Or, "Everything was just great when Tim Tebow was quarterbacking the Broncos." Well, at least we know that last one isn't really true. But you know what I mean?

It's an easy trap to fall into, especially when things aren't going our way. Sometimes things look so much better back in the day, when life was exactly as it should be. The truth is, the past wasn't perfect. The past had its own complications. The old you would tell the current you the problems you faced. We don't recognize how we see the past through rose-colored glasses, thinking the past was so much better, when the past had its struggles. It's a human thing to do, to forget what we should remember and remember what wasn't really there. We see it in the Israelites and today, but it robs today of its strength and possibilities.

Here's the oversimplified statement of the day: the calling of God is complicated. We sometimes have to go where we don't want to and do things we don't necessarily want to do. Who wants to love their neighbor when their neighbor is so annoying? What sense is there to love your enemies? And yet, because we confess that Christ is Lord, we have to take everything that comes with it, the easy and the not-so-easy. Often the latter comes more than the former. The Israelites wanted all the benefits with none of the responsibility. The children of Jacob became slaves to the Egyptians. They cried out to God, and God delivered them. Fast forward a little later, and they are Fed. Up. All they saw was lack. They remembered the comfort and familiarity of t Egypt, and faith in God went out the window. But it's not just their problem; it's a human problem. It's a problem that we experience today that takes away from the importance of God's calling. Let's look at the lesson of the Israelites in the desert, understand what scripture explains, and see how we can benefit from those lessons today, because the grass isn't always greener...back there.

When we hear today's lesson from Exodus, we want to scoff at the Israelites. Indeed, the first part of the passage comes across like a big old whine: "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!" You halfway imagine that Moses rolls his eyes at their complaining. This is only two months since God did great things to bring them out of Egypt. God brought down the plagues on the Egyptians, God had passed over their houses when the plague of death came, God had parted the Red Sea. They easily forgot what happened in the interest of what they wanted. What they wanted was not there, so they frankly bickered and whined. In essence, what they were afraid of was the unknown, the future God called them to. No matter that God was always there; what lay before them they did not know. So they started complaining about the first thing before them: what to eat. As we see, God did provide to satisfy them...but they were satisfied for only a while.

As much as we look down at the Israelites' complaint, it is a very human thing to do. These folks just witnessed one of the greatest miracles in scripture when God parted the Red Sea. God delivered the people from slavery, but, as humans are apt to do, their memory grows short. Things are just not as comfortable and familiar as they wanted, and they saw the past with rose-colored glasses. It wasn't that life in Egypt was better; it was just predictable. They knew what was expected of them. Now they found themselves thrust into the unpredictability of life in the wilderness. They knew where their bread was coming from; now they had no idea if they would be fed. They knew where they would sleep and what the threats were. There were no such guarantees out here; the wilderness was an unknown, and that made it frightening to these journeying Israelites. They did not know what their future might be. That part of human nature hasn't changed to this day. As much as we say we trust in the Lord, we always hold back doubt and concern. Those aren't bad things in themselves, but when they drive us to stay in the past instead of living into

the future, they become barriers to faithful service. As much as we dislike the response of the Israelites to their situation, we do the same things in more subtle ways.

No doubt, the future is a scary place. We cannot anticipate what lies before us. It may be good; it may be bad. There are no guarantees whatsoever for the Christian. God never promises us good things all the time; God never promises a cushy future or that we might get all that we want, contrary to some of the preachers out there. What God does promise is that God will be with us throughout it all. We can look at the future with uncertainty, but we cannot let that uncertainty paralyze us into staying into the past. The Israelites let that happen, and they began to see their past through rose-colored lenses. When we look at the past longingly, we stop being faithful people. We stop living in the present when there is service to be done for God and our neighbor. Essentially, when we live in the past, we tell God that the calling of now isn't good enough for us. Like the Israelites of scripture, we don't remember the good that God has done for us and tell God that the way before us isn't right, when we may not be correct about that.

Sometimes you just have to live into the uncertainty of the future. There's a good example right here. When you sign up to be a Methodist pastor, you live the life of uncertainty. You live a life of, well, fear, not knowing where the future lies. Indeed, any day, the bishop could give you a phone call to pack your bags to a new place, where you know nothing and no one. In the same way, a new pastor could arrive at a Methodist church any day and begin anew. Believe me, I'm not trying to tell you something. I'm not planning on packing my bags any time soon, but it's a natural part of the church's life, both for you and for me. Uncertainty, death, and new life is a part of this pastoral business, both spiritually and literally. There are no guarantees, and you may not always get what you

want. But when a pastor moves or when you get a new pastor, there's a new opportunity there. The lament may be the same, "Oh, why did the conference move so and so when everything was just fine?" Answers are not immediately there. The pastor may say the same thing, "Why am I moving when I'm not yet done with the job I set out to do?" But God may have a different idea in mind, contrary to what we want. Even though there is uncertainty, there is ample opportunity for service and growth.

The same can be said for the life of the church. We may not be where we want to be, where it is comfortable, where we know what the future looks like. It is unnerving; it is complicated. Nevertheless, God is here. I won't preach a theology that everything will always turn out perfectly. There's just too much that goes against that idea. It doesn't always happen in real life, and it didn't always happen in the bible. We can look at experiences in the past and see how we grew from them, how we became better people in spite of bad things happening, but it's not always true that everything will turn out perfectly. What I do preach is that no matter what happens, God is with us. God is with us. God will always seek to guide us toward something better, but what we define as better isn't necessarily what God is inviting us toward. Can we let go of what we want and see what God is inviting us into? It takes a big swallowing of the pride, but as the story continued, God rained bread from the sky in the form of manna. It may not have been what the Israelites wanted or expected, but it was what they needed. We often need to let go of what is expected or wanted before we can truly find what is needed, and when we do, we find there is plenty of time and space to be faithful people.

It has happened before, and it will happen again. Something changes against our will, and we don't like it. We fear of those things we cannot see, those events we cannot

anticipate so we scoff. The danger is to react out of fear instead of focus. The future will always make us afraid. The test of faith is intentionally focusing on the now and the future when things are at their most fearful. Faith will guide us to react more faithfully. The past is wonderful, but we should not make it out to be more than what it is: what has passed. The calling of God exists here and now, not in what was. God calls us into a faithful future. There are no guarantees on what the future looks like. Nevertheless, with our community surrounding us and God before us, we never face it alone. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.