

Community and Change-Bread for the Journey-Exodus 16: 1-6, 13-15 (January 26, 2020)

Last week I started this sermon series on community and change with a light bulb joke. What makes light bulb jokes so great for this topic is that they point out our particular quirks or approaches to change. Here is another one, having picked on the United Church last week we'll go with the Pentecostals this week. How many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb? The answer—"No one actually touches the light bulb, simply as many as it takes to form a prayer group to ask the Holy Spirit to bring about the needed change.

It's a season of change isn't it? We're only a month removed from the annual making of New Year resolutions. I won't ask how many of you are still sticking with them. But I do want to ask by a show of hands if you've ever felt discouraged in the process of change and wanted to turn back to the way things were before? It's a very human experience. This week the reflection is entitled "Bread for the Journey". What sustains us in the wilderness of change? What feeds us, keeps us going during uncertain and volatile times when we're tempted to turn back?

May I begin with a story about this, about a particularly devastating change in someone's life? It's a story about Bill, for whom I officiate his thirty four year old daughter's funeral. Standing in the receiving line during the visitation the words of comfort from friends and family become a blur to Bill in the days and weeks that follow, except for one comment. The mourner who makes the comment had also lost a child, he asks Bill how he is doing, to which Bill replies, he didn't know it was possible for something to hurt so much. The mourner looks Bill in the eye and says, "well, get used to it, it's not going to get any better." At the time, the bluntness of the comment takes Bill aback, but a couple of months later he describes it to me as the most helpful thing anyone says to him. Because, as the days and weeks go by things don't get any better, the death of a child isn't something that gets better; it is something Bill learns to live with, like a disability that requires a major life adjustment. Those words are so helpful to Bill because they ground him in the reality of the situation where he faces the challenges of this new wilderness honestly, not retreating into denial or forcing himself into imposed expectations of healing but facing life honestly and thus able to seek an enduring grace and hope grounded in reality, not a false and flimsy optimism that disappoints. When we are in the wilderness of change what is most helpful is what grounds us in the reality of the present moment, to see things as they are, not as we wish they were. In this post-Christmas season we are not that far removed from delving into one of the great mysteries of our faith—that our God is an incarnate God, taking on our flesh, dwelling among us in the beautiful and ugly realities of existence.

In our faith story this morning the Jewish people were seeking to escape the reality of the moment. They were feeling abandoned and insecure and so they turn on Moses; "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we had lamb stews and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this

whole assembly with hunger."¹ Empty stomachs have them longing for the good old days of slavery. If you put up your hand earlier you know how the Israelites felt.

The truth of our faith story is that if we can stay real, if we can accept and stay in the moment, God provides bread for the journey in the wilderness of change. God's message to Israel is "don't look back at Egypt, that's a closed door, look for the open window. Look at what I am doing in this moment to encourage you, to sustain you, to feed you." It is by staying in the moment and not running back that the people are fed quails and manna by God.

When we see things as they are and accept things as they are and face the challenges of change head on, we also open ourselves up to the opportunities that will lead us through the wilderness of change. I like to put it this way, living in the reality of the moment positions us to see and accept grace. Looking back nostalgically or denying reality any other way diverts our attention from what God is doing in the present moment, we miss opportunities for grace. It's like that old saying about the door closing and the window opening, we're so focused on the door that we don't see the window.

I have a friend who struggles with addiction for many years. Addiction is all about escaping the moment, because the moment for the addict is so filled with trauma or memories of trauma. At one point, my friend has his "hitting bottom" experience, as they say in the 12 steps. Hitting bottom is the worst of the worst, for my friend it was the threat of his wife leaving and taking the kids. The threat of losing his family shakes him out of denial into accepting the reality of the moment, of what he had done to himself and his family. He starts looking for help. He is one of these people that reads the newspaper from cover to cover. He looks down in the community events section in the paper and there is a 12-step meeting listed for his particular addiction. He is surprised; he has never seen it before. How is it that he has not seen it? He goes over into the recycling pile to look at previous editions of the paper and discovers the meeting is listed there for every edition. The meeting was listed there, but prior to that week he hadn't been there, he had not accepted the reality of the moment, that he was an addict in trouble. But now, living in reality, there it was—manna from heaven.

I'm wondering, as you've been sitting here listening to this what has arisen in you? What reflections, questions, stories or thoughts have come to the fore? We're going to take some time now where I would invite you to share with a neighbour. This is by invitation, feel free to tell your neighbour you'd like to pass if you'd rather just contemplate what you've heard on your own. I'll ask afterward if anyone wants to share with the larger group.

The Word of God for us in this scripture today is that God's provision is to be found in reality, in the midst of our need, our confusion, our powerlessness—when we decide not to run from the challenges of change. Bread for the journey is found when we surrender

¹ Exodus 16: 3.

in faith to where God is calling and leading and we start paying attention to what is being offered to us in the moment.

The grace of doing this is to discover that although life involves constant change, often accompanied by pain, fear and anxiety, although we often find ourselves in the wilderness, the grace is that is to discover that ultimately life is trustworthy. As we learn to surrender and pay attention to what is being offered to us in the moment we overcome the challenges of change, each moment of faithfulness builds on the previous one, faith builds, trust builds, we face each new challenge with a greater sense that there is enough bread for our journey, that we are being looked after. So we put one foot in front of the other even if we are uncertain of where ultimately we are headed because the One who leads us is trustworthy. We find that we can make the whole journey this way, finding the bread we need as we go along. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar