

Into the Unknown
Exodus 16:2-15
20 September 2020
Sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae

We are going to be spending a little bit of time in the Old Testament this month. Last week we encountered Joseph and his brothers and were reminded about how God can reconcile difficult and troubling situations for good. Today, we join the Israelites in the desert, several years later, facing very challenging situations, being reminded about God's faithfulness to God's people. That is what all of these stories are ultimately about, that we encounter in the Old Testament. They are stories of God's faithfulness to God's people, stories that can strengthen and reassure us when, like God's people before us, we find ourselves facing challenging and uncertain times.

And I must admit this story today, is one of my favourites; grumpy and complaining people shown against the love and generosity of God. This story is just so real isn't it? After escaping a life of slavery and embarking on a journey toward freedom, the people begin to get discouraged. And it is no wonder. They have seen some terrible things – the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the drowning of the Egyptians who were chasing them. They are haunted by the realization that life in the desert isn't easy. They are hungry, thirsty, scared, and exhausted and they

have no idea what is going to come next. They had loved the idea of a new life, they had trusted Moses to lead them, but they never anticipated the fear they'd encounter along the road to new life, they never anticipated the challenge of change, the challenge of a life in precarity.

That is what their life now is, a life of precarity, of uncertainty and unpredictability. They are in a time of constant change. When you think about it, we can kind of relate to that, can't we? Even before this pandemic happened we were living in a time of rapid change – technological change, climate change, it was hard to keep up with how life was changing before. And now, well, we have learned that even the things we could count on – community, health, a measure of predictability, gathering with friends, visiting loved ones, gathering for worship and celebrations – none of that is entirely stable anymore. The things we relied upon for a sense of stability and assurance are no longer certain. Like the Israelites who now find themselves making a new path forward in the desert, we too are living in a time of great precarity.

And there is just no way back. As challenging as things were for the the Israelites, as scared and uncertain as they were feeling, there was just no way they could turn around and go back to the familiar. Because the life they left behind no longer existed for them. They had no choice but to move

forward, into the new life that God was bringing into being for them. And it is like that for us too. There is no going back, only learning, through the grace of God to live in our new normal, and to look with hope to the new life God is helping us to create.

On any given day I seem to lose count of how many times I hear someone say “I can’t wait until things are back to normal” and then hear someone list the things they miss, or the things they are finding particularly hard in this pandemic time. And usually it is just simple things ... when going to the grocery store wasn’t a hassle, when what we needed at the store was readily available, when we could go for dinner without checking the weather forecast first, when children’s back to school worries were whether they’d be in the same class as their best friend, or whether they’d make the soccer team. I find myself having those moments of nostalgia too. A lot. And it is totally normal, we humans like predictability, we find change hard, and we find uncertainty even harder. That is why this scripture lesson has endured so many years, because we can still relate to it today. Change is hard, uncertainty is awful, and it is so easy to get discouraged in times of precarity.

But today’s scripture story is a reminder that even when things are uncertain, even when things seem unpredictable, there is one thing we can

always rely on ... the love and faithfulness of our God. That is what this whole story today is about. When we meet the Israelites today they are beginning to give voice to their frustrations and their fears about change. And it won't be the last time. They are at their wits end convinced they will starve, that they will die right there in the desert, terrified they have been forgotten. But God comes to them. God comes to them in their distress, God comes to them in the midst of their grumpiness, their anger, their doubts, God comes to them in the midst of their full humanity and gives them what they need.

But what they needed didn't totally come in the form they expected. God did send quails that they could hunt, but the bread, that was something altogether different. The bread God sent the Israelites did not look like any bread they had ever seen, in fact they had to ask Moses what it was, but it had the power to nourish them. But there was a catch. When the people awoke and saw this bounty of manna around them it would be tempting for them to collect baskets and baskets of it, to take all of it and hoard it for another day. But God was very clear, only take what you need for that day, because there will be more tomorrow. Trust me.

You see, what the Israelites really needed wasn't just food, but trust.

That isn't an easy lesson for any of us to learn is it? Trust that God will provide what we need, not just today, but tomorrow too.

Today's scripture is a reminder of God's enduring faithfulness to us through all of the challenges and precarity of this life, and it is a lesson to us to trust, to try our best to put aside the fears that overwhelm us and cloud our vision and recognize God in our midst, and to trust in the healing and saving power of God to strengthen and nourish us for the way forward. It was becoming clear, God's grace was not just going to be for that day, or that week, for the Israelites. God didn't just come to be with them because of their complaining and their fears, God made a covenant, a promise with God's people to be with them through it all, not just this day, but everyday going forward, just as God had been with them every day to this point, too.

As Christians we know that God keeps this covenant, this promise with us, today, too. In fact God loves us so much that God chose to walk this life with us, in the flesh, through Jesus, experiencing all of the joys and challenges of this human life, with us, even into death. But the story didn't end there. In the darkest and most desperate time, after the world had done its worst, Christ rose again to life, assuring us that even death has no power stronger than the love of God for God's children. Even after death, new life will come. And today in the midst of whatever darkness we face,

whatever challenges threaten our peace, whatever doubts fill our hearts, the Holy Spirit comes to us, empowering and encouraging us, reminding us to trust that God will be with us tomorrow, as God is with us today, as God has been with all God's people from the beginning of time.

How have you been nourished by God? What assurances have you been given that you can trust God's faithfulness in your own life? Where have you seen God active in your life, in times of stress and upheaval, times of uncertainty and doubt? What hope is God wanting to fill you with today? Remember how last week I said that our lives are experiences of the hope of the Risen Christ? Each of us, even the most doubting among us, can find proof of God's power and faithfulness in our lives. Like the manna the Israelites received, it may not always look the way we think it should, or immediately make sense to us, but God's hope, God's love, God's strength is breaking into our lives, in times of peace and times of precarity, promising nourishment as we follow the road we have been called to travel. Even when we are afraid of the unknown, even when we fear new life.

Kahlil Gibran, a Lebanese- American poet wrote in his poem *Fear*,
It is said that before entering the sea
a river trembles with fear.

*She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.
And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.
But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.
Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.
The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.*

The Israelites still had a very long road ahead of them through that desert before they reached the promised land, and Moses was going to hear a lot more grumbling before they were through. But today they received the reassurance they needed, the nourishment they needed, to face another day and move forward into the new life that God was creating for them. And they were taught that come what may, our God was always with them, and would always be with them, helping them to find their way through the unknown.

As we travel through our own precarious days may we learn to trust that our God is with us, strengthening and encouraging us, in ways we may not be able to imagine, or even recognize at first, but in ways which will bring us to new life. Thanks be to God.