

When Enough Is Enough
Exodus 16, selected verses
Matthew 20:1-16

“The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

Between Egypt and the Promised Land is the wilderness--what some have called “liminal space.” The word comes from the Latin word *limen* which means threshold. “It is an in-between place,” Professor of Hebrew Bible Ann Fritschel writes, as “in the threshold of a door, [where] you are neither in nor out of the room” and, I would add, when you often are not sure whether you are coming or going.

Think, for a moment, about the liminal places in your own life. A soon-to-be empty nester said to me last Sunday, “I feel like I am entering a different space and I don’t yet know who I will be in it.” Likewise the young bartender at Hokka Hokka said to me the other night, “I graduate in a few months and I guess I will move back home for a while until I figure out where I am going and what I am doing.” A doctor says to you, “The tumor is cancerous” and, I am here to tell you, you enter a liminal space that I can only describe as surreal, suspended in time. Then there are new retirees who often refuse invitations to be on session or serve as deacons because suddenly, the old obligations gone, they need to be without obligations for a time—need to wake up to emptiness. I also think the old adage about not making any big decisions for a year after the death of a spouse has to do with the liminal space you have entered unwittingly, where the decisions you will make are not really about what you should do or where you should go but about who you will be. Liminal space is where insecurity vies with anticipation, despair dukes it out with hope in the middle of the night, routines and roles do not avail: where the something that has ended and the something that has yet to begin is you.

The story before us now and for a month of Sundays is the story not of an individual but of a people in liminal space. Their life in Egypt having been ended by what insurance companies might call “Acts of God”--nine plagues and a parted sea, to be exact--the Israelites flee their identity as slaves under Pharaoh’s control. But soon we learn that this is not an identity they can easily quit. To be sure, life in Egypt was hard, their moral choices limited, their treatment severe, but they apparently had food and water and a roof over their heads. I remember the words of a tour guide in East Germany only a few months after the Berlin Wall had come down. When asked what it felt like to be free she said in a voice that was an admixture of disgust and fear, “I had enough freedom. I do not want this freedom.” Three days into the wilderness, with only the clothes on their backs, they have had enough freedom. The people cry out to Moses, demanding he meet the most basic need of living creatures in the desert, the need for water.

Moses, in turn, cries to the Lord who provides sweet water chased by an ominous Deuteronomic warning: “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.” Have they simply exchanged one Pharaoh for another, albeit one who promise to be more benevolent than the first? Who is this God is going to be toward them and what obedience will this God will require of them. Will they still be slaves who simply serve a different Lord, or is there something about this Lord’s providence and promises that will set them truly free?

Rested and refreshed by water, the people resume the journey only to cry out again, a month and a half later, this time with the admixture of disgust and fear that I heard in the voice of the East German guide, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in 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.” “‘They complained’ is always in the passive form,” a rabbinic exegete notes, “since it reflects on the complainer.” Anticipating the people’s complaint, born of scarcity, that there would not be enough for everyone, and countering their hoarding that would surely follow, God rains bread from heaven. But only enough for the day and enough for all. To wit: “Those who gathered more had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.” If too much manna had been gathered by any one Israelite, it simply rotted overnight. To put a point on the story, unlike Pharaoh’s economy that allowed some to accumulate enormous wealth while others subsisted on barely enough, the nature of this God’s providence in the liminal space of the wilderness meant to

shape a people to trust, day by day, with God as their provider, all would have enough. According to Fritsch, “The gift of manna indicates that Israel is to build a society where there is no hoarding of the basic necessities...[where people are freed from want to] live in trust and generosity toward their neighbor.”

Still I wonder: Will they continue to be slaves who simply serve a different Lord, or is there something about this Lord’s providence that will set them free? In an astonishing interpretation of the story before us this morning, Avivah Zornberg lets us in on three aspects of God’s thinking process as God begins to recreate a people fit for the promised land. First she cites a midrash that supposes “God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, because it was close; for God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds...and return to Egypt.’” God led them by a crooked, zig-zag route because it would be harder to return, harder to say of the freedom-faith-is that “enough is enough.” Hence, their journey and ours through the wilderness is crooked by design—so many twists and turns along the way that seem unnecessarily hard--lest we change our minds about this God and his promises and return to Egypt.

But part and parcel of our crooked journey is the immense time God knows it will take to make sense of what we have left, what we are undergoing, and what we yet will become. Therefore recurring and at the center of the time it takes to sojourn is a particular sort of time, known here for the first time as Sabbath. Just as the wilderness is a place of emptiness, so God intend Shabbat to be “the very enactment of ‘vacancy’—of ‘not-doing,’ of an apparent lethargy, In the ‘empty time’ of Shabbat, the question of the wilderness comes to its sharpest expression: “What does one want to do with one’s time?” This story of the wilderness journey, Zornberg says, is really about the Sabbath. It is about a people who are given the space and the time on the seventh day to make a full stop and reflect on the crooked way they have come, on the difficulties they have endured, and on who they will therefore be in the land where they are destined to arrive. On the Sabbath, therefore, God’s people are sated by the manna from the sixth day that is miraculously enough for the seventh day. They have nothing to do with their time. So they gather first in a “restlessness and boredom” that gives way to “expectancy and stillness.” They draw near to the Lord who has heard their complaining. And with this time they worship the God who provides enough for all, worship the God who knows not only the needs of their stomachs but also the needs of their hearts and their minds, worship the God who, on the Sabbath, in Zornberg’s words, recreates this people.

Then finally, of the way of God’s recreation Zornberg says, God remusicks them so that, given “world enough and time [enough], the vibrations of a new music may liberate them from the decrees of Egypt.” The God who promised to heal them at the beginning of the journey now puts Moses in front of them as a conductor. Zornberg imagines him with raised hands before a people who are craning their necks upward, not speaking but beginning to sing a new song to the Lord, a “thin line of melody [that] selects for goodness and beauty but is given gravity by melancholy,...[that sings] the complex music—joyful and sad—of the human heart.”

I imagine Nicolae Moldoveanu was just such a Moses for the Romanian Pentecostal Church, his arms raised to teach a people the thin line of melody that selects for goodness and beauty but is given gravity by the melancholy of years under Communist rule. I imagine a clarity among Christians in Romania about their zigzagging in the wilderness, in the liminal space of faith that sends them fleeing tyrants in place and in secret. And so I imagine God remusicking them with 6000 hymns that will accompany them to their destination in freedom under God’s reign.

I only pray in this liminal time of church and society, of hurricanes and earthquakes, of nuclear threats and counter-threats, I pray that we do not lose heart and turn back, but rather journey on together toward the love that is our destination, becoming a people who trust that God’s providential care is sufficient for all. And I also pray that, as we continue to make a full-stop on the first day of the week in the liminal space of this sanctuary, our boredom giving way to expectancy, I pray that the God whose Son feeds us with the manna of heaven’s bread and slakes our thirst with the cup of salvation will continue to send us conductors, hands raised to teach us the melody that recreates us and opens our hearts to trust and generosity. Amen.