

Journey: Where We Are

Exodus 16: 1-7

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim and came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord... This is what the Lord has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer per person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." ¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it became wormy and rotten.

I want you to think about that map I gave the kids for a moment and specifically those words, "You are here." If you were going to create a map, or tell the story of our church – with the whole arc of our existence, where do you think we are, right now? If you were going to make a mark on that arc that says, "You are here," what would that mean?

Where are we as a faith community right now?

Think about that for a minute.

[pause]

Last week, Jeff preached about where we have been. He told the story about how this church went from having to vacate the sanctuary because the roof might collapse to not only working together to fix the roof but to build the Centre School a few years later, even after the economy crashed after 9/11. And as I was listening to his sermon, I think what stood out to me most is that this community has been through hard times before and, in each of those times, there was a choice.

You had the choice to play it safe, to try to keep going with business as usual. Or you had the choice to take a risk and do something bold. When the roof was caving in and there were only a handful of people here, the easy thing likely would have been to just give up. Close the church, sell the property and try to find another community to connect with. But that's not what you did. And when the time came to build the Centre School, I love Jeff's story of being away and thinking you were only going to build one or two classrooms and then coming back to find that you're building a whole new school. Or the last capital campaign. That wasn't a time of crisis. Things were going well. You could have easily just continued business as usual, but instead you took yet another risk to build a space for youth not only in our church but in our whole community.

And that brings me to how I would answer question, "Where are we?" I think the best way to answer that is to tell you about last Wednesday. This was the first day of Nourish, our new midweek dinner in collaboration with East Church. I got to the church a little after 3 to meet Mike Baker, our chef, and to make sure everything was ready and when I got here, there were kids running around, laughing on the playground. The Centre School has been such a gift to this community and it's a gift to me every time I'm sitting in my office and hear the laughter rising up from the playground below. Down in the youth room, the Wildcat Den was hopping as 25 or so middle school students now have a fun and safe place to go after school. And then at 6PM, Johnson Hall was full as we came together as a community for good food, a lot of laughter, and meaningful conversation. As I left that night, I walked out the red doors to the sound of music and dancing as the Kenny Academy's Irish dance company had expanded to a new Wednesday night class in Huntington Hall.

Think about all the good things that happened in this building just on that one day – this past Wednesday because this church chose to be bold – to build the Centre School and Johnson Hall, to build the youth room. Whenever, we've found ourselves in times of transition, we've always chosen the bold route and look at where that has brought us.

We are at a place where so many of the good things that happen in our community are because this church has a history of not taking the easy path, of choosing the bold and exciting, but risky, way. That's who we've been that has led us to where we are now.

But there's another way I'd answer that question about where we are right now. I think this is one of those great moments of transition not just for our church but for all churches. I don't have to tell you that the world has been upended in more ways than any of us could have imagined over the last three years. While COVID is still with us and likely will be for some time, we as a society are gradually starting to figure out what life looks like beyond pandemic protocols. In so many ways, it feels to me like we are living in an in-between time. It feels like we've come out of a period of time that was so very hard for a lot of reasons, but we're not yet sure where we are going or how we're going to get there. And in these in-between times, I think we find ourselves facing the same choice that this church has faced more than a few times throughout our history – are we going to try to go back to what was or just hold steady or will we try something bold and risky?

Whenever God's people find themselves in a time of great transition, there's always the temptation to try to go back to what was before. But I can't find a single example in Scripture where that's what God asks the people to do. God asks them to venture out into the unknown and the scary, to discover a new thing, a new land, a new calling. And there's some great Scriptures about the people reaching the end of that journey. We have the story of the Hebrew people crossing the Jordan River into the Promised land or the exiles in Babylon returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city walls. We have Jesus himself uttering the cry of completion from the cross, "It is finished."

But the vast majority of our Scripture is about the journey, about the time when the people have left the past behind but not yet arrived at their future. It's about an in-between-time. Next week, we'll turn our attention to where this journey might lead us, but for now, I want us to see this period of transition, this in-between time as a gift. No doubt, it can be hard and scary, but a gift nonetheless, precisely because in-between times invite us to ask very directly, "Who is God calling us to be right now?"

That's what the time in the wilderness was about for the Hebrew people. They had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years. That's all any of them knew. And then God does this amazing thing. Through Moses, God leads them to freedom and calls them to build a new society. But here's the thing, the only society any of them knew about was Pharaoh's Egypt and God had no interest in them replicating that society with a few on top with the many being forced into slavery or oppression. God wanted them to build a different kind of society – a society of peace and justice or what the Hebrew scriptures call "Shalom."

That's what the time in the wilderness was about – the people had to learn how to form something different than what they experienced in Egypt. So they wandered for forty years. Now, these stories are not necessarily meant to be taken literal. The Hebrew writers were masters of symbol and metaphor. The number 40 is the same number of weeks in a pregnancy. 40 weeks to birth something new. Anytime you see the number 40 in Scripture, you know something new is about to be born into the world. 40 years into the wilderness to birth a new community – not one like Egypt but one of shalom. It was during this time that God gave the people the 10 commandments – commandments that are easy for us to think are primarily individual rules for good people to follow but were really more about building a new community.

You shall have no other Gods before me is the first commandment. In Egypt, Pharaoh was like God. The commandment then is not just about the need for us to worship God alone but also to never make a human into a god, to never give a human ultimate power over other people.

You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. In Egypt, the Hebrew slaves never had a day of rest. In the new society, everyone gets to take time to rest, to enjoy life.

And we could go on and on. Do you see what's happening here? God is teaching the people how to live as free people in such a way that respects the freedom, worth, and dignity of every person. And we see that lesson, maybe most clearly in the story of manna in the wilderness. In Egypt, the Hebrew slaves were tasked with making bricks for Pharaoh to build more and more storehouses for his grain. You see, Pharaoh controlled the entire food supply of the whole nation that he hoarded into his storehouses. He then charged the people extreme prices just for them to have food to eat. When they couldn't pay for the food, he took their land as payment. You see, in Egypt, all food, all land belonged to Pharaoh. So the very first lesson that God teaches the people in the wilderness is one of the first lessons we teach our kids – how to share. Take what you need, God says. And leave the rest.

Do you see how different this is than everything the people experienced in Egypt? It was in the time of wandering in the wilderness, the in-between time, that God taught the people how to be who God was calling them to be.

But here's the thing, the time in the wilderness was crucial, but it was not easy. More than once, the Hebrew people wanted to go back to Egypt. In fact, that's how the whole story of Manna began. At least in Egypt, we had food, they said. When the future is unclear and the present feels like the ground is shifting beneath us, it is tempting to just try to reclaim what was. But friends, that's not possible. We will never go back to who we were before the pandemic. The world has changed. We have changed. We can also not try to rush to whatever future or destination we think might await us.

Instead, we can choose to lean in to this time of in-betweenness and to listen to what God might be saying to us right now. We can remember who we've been, we can remember that God has been faithful every time we've stepped out into the unknown with boldness, and we can trust that if we lean into the same lessons God taught the Hebrew people in the wilderness – the lessons of peace, justice, shalom – that we will discover our way ahead even as we wait in the in-between time.

Amen.