

Numbers 11: 4-17

Faith When the Going Gets Tough

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Today we continue our series on Faith. This month we have been studying the story of the Exodus. Two weeks ago I preached about the way that God called Moses at the burning bush. That was an inspiring moment when Moses discovered that God had big plans for his life. Instead of tending sheep, God needed Moses to free his people from slavery. Last week Heike preached about the time when Moses led the people across the Dead Sea after the waters parted for them, another inspiring moment in the story. Moses turned toward the sea and prayed as hard as he knew how, and lo and behold the waters parted for the people to cross safely on dry land. Then after their celebration, they began the journey through the wilderness. Things got much more difficult.

Today's lesson is not quite so inspiring. Once the people began the journey through the desert and the thrill of their miraculous escape receded, they recognized that they were going to have to figure out how to survive on manna, and learn to live together. They complained to Moses from the start. They complained about the lack of water. They complained about the scarcity of food and the quality of the food. They complained about how long the journey was taking them. They complain about just about everything.

Faith is easy when the waters part and you step into a miracle. Then everyone is dancing for joy, but how do you find faith when the people grow hungry, and rebellion is in the air. How do you find faith when the way is hard, and there is no end in sight? How do you find faith when you have given all you had to give and still things look uncertain?

Really, that is when faith matters, isn't it. It is nice to have faith when the waters part. It is easy to have faith when the miracles are fresh in your mind. What is much harder, but so much more essential is how to live with faith when nothing is working, and time is dragging on, and you don't know how long you can keep your hope alive.

This passage in Numbers 11 is all about a crisis. It describes a meltdown. The people won't stop complaining and finally God gets angry and Moses is at the end of his rope too. I read it so you can remember that the Bible is not much use to us if it only tells about the easy parts of life. This is a story about the hard times, when patience is frayed, and everyone is about to give up. What can we learn from this scripture passage about how to have faith when the going gets tough? How do you keep the faith when the going gets tough?

In the first place celebrate how far you have come. Look back. If you want to keep the faith when the going gets tough you have to look at how far you have come. The Hebrews needed to look back and celebrate all those miracles of faith and hope that had brought them this far. They needed to think about where they were, in terms of where they had been. They had been slaves in Egypt but God heard their cries, and God sent help. They were scared but God sent ten plagues and they survived all of them. The night of Passover was terrifying but they took their unleavened bread and made a hasty escape, and survived. They heard Pharaoh's chariots coming after them and they were apoplectic, but God parted the waters, and they walked through. They were thirsty and Moses found water in the desert. They were hungry and God sent manna.

In the Bible, God often reminds the people "I am the One who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves." Why does God remind them of this so often? God says this over and over so that the people can see how far they have come. When you are in a crisis it is easy to become overwhelmed with how awful things are now. It helps to consider how far you have come. But the

very act of re-counting your success can give you courage. It can serve to remind you that you did not know how to find your way many times, yet you prevailed.

That is true for parents, too. Chris and Abbey baptized their son, Carter today. We blessed him and we asked God's blessing on his parents too. Parents can get pretty overwhelmed, especially in the first few months of a child's life. It sometimes helps to remind yourself how far you have come. If you stop and think about it, it can help. It is not easy being pregnant but you got through it. It is not easy giving birth but you managed. It is not easy figuring out when your child is hungry or wet, but you do. Whether you are up late with a child who is feverish, or just waiting for your teenagers to arrive safely with your car, it helps when you get nervous to look back and see how far you have come.

We have come to one of those moments in our Capital Campaign. We had a plan that was slated to cost \$4.2 million and it would have filled in the space between Fellowship Hall and the sanctuary with a new atrium. We have raised about \$2.2 million. Though we are still hoping to raise some more money we need to address our building needs now, because we desperately need a new heating system, and windows, and an elevator so our own active members can all attend worship. We need to make changes now that will reduce our carbon footprint and make our patchwork building more intuitive.

This might be a moment to say look at how far we have come together. We have raised more money than ever before in any capital campaign in this church. We inherited a building that contained a rabbit warren of rooms because no one in the history of this church has been able to step back and ask the big question of how to make the church architecturally inviting. So every building committee, including the one that built this sanctuary concerned itself with one aspect of the church, and did not really consider how it all related. Whatever we do going forward in this

campaign we need to think about how much we have done, and how far we have come. We are blazing a new trail, in the history of this church; of course it is messy sometimes. But look at how far we have come.

In the second place, when the going gets tough, take a break. Pace yourself. There is a saying- when the going gets tough, the tough get going. I have another saying- when the going gets tough, the wise take a break. When life was impossible and the people were all arguing with him or with God, Moses often took a break. In this passage he did that. He got away and took his troubles to God. There he cried out his frustration. He gave voice to his anger. Honest and sarcastic in turns, Moses poured his heart out to God.

These conversations with God were Moses' prayer retreats. Here he would lay his burdens down, give vent to his own frustrations. He would step back from the fray and assess his options. Whenever you feel overwhelmed it is tempting to throw in the towel. It is tempting to get angry. It is tempting to say or do something you may later regret, an indirect way of sabotaging everything.

Most people assume that you have two choices in this moment, going forward or retreating. But I like to think that there is a third option – taking a break. Sometimes when you pause

- take a deep breath, write in a journal, take a nap, exercise, say a prayer, >

The problem does not go away, but you come back to it with new insights.

Step aside.

Finally, when the going gets tough look around you. You are Free. Be free. You might imagine that the Hebrews would be so grateful to be free, but no. They were scared of freedom. When the going got tough they became victims of their freedom. For along with freedom

comes the responsibility to own the hard truth that the buck stops with you. That is tough, because it is so tempting to feel like a martyr. How can this be happening to me? Why do I have to endure all of this? These former slaves were finally free, and they wanted to be victims of their freedom.

The Bible says that God wants you to be free and God will be on your side when you strive to find freedom. God may even part some waters to show you how to find your potential. But then you have to walk each day, not as a slave or servant to others, not as a child or dependent, but as an adult who is liberated, with all the choices and responsibility this entails. When the going gets tough God cannot protect you from that. God cannot protect you from life.

Jewish rabbis say that the Hebrews had to wander for two generations in the wilderness because it took them 40 years to transition from slavery to freedom. The journey is not that far. They seemed to be going in circles much of the time. Perhaps they were lost, but they were finding themselves, every bit as much as they were finding their way. It took them two generations to learn how to be free. Freedom does not come naturally to people who have been slaves. They had grown to be dependent on their overseers. Like people who have been in jail for long term, it was hard to re-enter society.

Freedom is hard for many people. As children we are told what to do. As employees we learn to live with constraints. As members of society we strive to follow the rules. The skills we learned that helped us fit in, and find our way can also keep us trapped sometimes.

I want to finish with a story about an unlikely hero in Washington DC; that is the Senate Chaplain Rev. Barry Black. Rev. Black has run a prayer breakfast for Senators from both sides of the aisle, because new senators need a pastor. They often arrive in the Senate chambers after successful careers in business or government where they earned a reputation getting things done. In the Senate

they encounter gridlock, and suddenly for the first time in their lives they are held in perpetual check.

Black's reputation as a pastor to so many has grown in the last 3 weeks as the Congress has shut down the government, and threatened to put the Treasury in default. Every day of the recent governmental crisis the Senate started with a prayer, and sometimes these prayers are a perfunctory ritual. But Black used this moment to talk with candor about hypocrisy and compromise, and he did not mince his words. Black was not afraid to use his voice to say what he believed the senators needed to hear. Most of us would have censored ourselves, but this man knew what it meant to be really free. What I found inspiring about the Senate Chaplain was that he used the power of his pulpit, at a time when everyone felt helpless. Black did what he could do. When the going gets tough most of us feel victimized. We re-count all the ways we feel trapped, but what we fail to do is use our God-given creativity to write our own ticket. We fail to figure out how to make the most of our situation. We fail to use the freedom that they we **do** have to the fullest extent.

Let us pray....