

“Living in the Past”
Exodus 17:1-7

Two monks were making a holy pilgrimage. During the course of their journey, they came to a river where they met a beautiful young woman -- dressed in expensive clothes and with her hair done up in the latest fashion. She was afraid of the current and afraid of ruining her lovely clothing, so asked the brothers if they might carry her across the river. The younger and more exacting of the brothers was offended at the very idea and turned away with an attitude of disgust. The older brother didn't hesitate, and quickly picked the woman up on his shoulders and carried her across the river. She thanked him and went on her way. The monks resumed their walk, the older one enjoying the beautiful countryside, while the younger one grew more and more angry and distracted to the point he couldn't keep his silence. He burst out, "Brother, we are taught to avoid contact with women, and there you were, not just touching a woman, but *carrying her on your shoulders!*" The older monk looked at the younger with a loving smile and said, "Brother, I set her down two hours ago; why are you still carrying her?"

It is hard to let go of the past! The past is part of who we are, yet the past can become all that we are! It is a fine line between valuing the past and being stuck in the past. If we get stuck living in the past or holding onto the grudges and ways of the past, there is no room for the Spirit of God to transform us. The people of Israel had to learn this lesson over and over again during their time of journeying in the desert from their time of being in Egypt as slaves to having freedom.

Today's Bible story is about another incident in the long story of Israel's struggle as they were led by Moses out of Egypt. The climate in the desert in Sinai where they journeyed was dry, hot and arid. Fresh water was extremely scarce. Moses came into conflict with the Israelites because they had found no adequate sources of water. They wanted to return to Egypt where water had been plentiful. They wanted to move forward and be free, yet they were stuck in their past experiences and needs. So, they decide to sue Moses and eventually God for leading them to this time of thirst. The word that is used for "quarrelling," in Hebrew *Rib*, is a technical legal term. It means "to bring suit" or "to plead your case." In other words, in this event, Israel is bringing a suit against Moses and God. Their quarrel with God has now escalated into a formal legal suit! Their accusation is based on their past, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Their legal demand is "Give us water." And indeed God goes on trial with them. In Hebrew law it was required that at a trial the accused would stand before the court. The accused was then given opportunity to speak or act in his or her defense, and then would receive the verdict given by selected "elders of Israel" (Deut. 19:17; 25:1-3; 17:8-13). Thus, God instructs Moses to select elders of Israel to join him to watch the accused give a defense and then render a verdict. It is amazing that God is the accused! God actually helps Moses get water out of the rock. The issue is resolved that God did not get the people out of Egypt to kill them with thirst. "Moses called the place where the lawsuit took place, Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested God, saying 'Is God among us or not'" *Massah* means "trial" and *Meribah* means "contention."

The problem that the people of Israel faced and which we also face is that their vision was limited by their past experiences and their fears. First, when things got hard, they started looking back and said to themselves, "Well, in the good old days even though we were in slavery, we had food and water." How often do we do that? In the good old days, we used to have families together. In the good old days, children used to mind their parents. In the good old days, people used to volunteer in church more. In the good old days, our country used to be more Christian. In the good old days, our economy was strong and we were number 1 in the world. But when the "good old days" were happening we didn't know they were that good and some of the stuff

was not really as we remember it! With this kind of thinking we often limit ourselves to what we already know instead of the potential of new knowledge and new experiences. We cannot imagine where God might lead us because we can only perceive what we are going through right now through our past experiences. We have to be intentional about opening ourselves up to the future and to new levels of awareness of God. In his book, *A Brief History of Everything*, the philosopher-psychologist Ken Wilber uses an example of how we are sometimes unable to see beyond our present and past experiences. He wrote, "If you take [very young] children and right in front of their eyes pour the water from a short glass into a tall glass, and ask them which glass has more water, they will always say the tall glass has more, even though they saw you pour the same amount from one glass to the other. They cannot 'conserve volume.' Certain 'obvious' things that we see, they do not and cannot see –they live in a different world space. If a few years later... you repeat the experiment, the kids will always say that both glasses have the same amount of water....And, if you show them a videotape from the earlier period... they will deny it's them! They simply cannot imagine somebody being so stupid..." Sometimes we are limited by world space and understandings.

The second way we are limited by our past is through our fears. One man said to his friend: "Say, you look depressed. What are you thinking about?" "My future," was the quick answer. "What makes it look so hopeless?" "My past." Our human minds see all of our past experiences as present! How often do you feel that some of the same stuff keeps happening to you? How often do you have the same arguments with your children or loved ones? In his book, *Getting the Love You Want* psychologist Harville Hendrix talks about the struggle between our old brain and new brain. Our old brain is the primitive part of our self that seeks to protect us from danger. Our new brain is the part that makes choices, knows a higher level of reality and knows the difference between the past and the present. To illustrate, Hendrix gives this example, "Imagine that you are happily eating breakfast, and your spouse suddenly criticizes you for burning the waffles. Your old brain, the perpetual guardian of your safety, instantly prompts you to fight or flee. It cares not that the person who criticized you is your spouse; all it cares about is that you're under attack. Unless you interfere with your automatic old-brain response, you immediately return your partner's critical remark with a scathing rejoinder –"Well, I may have burned the waffles, but you spilled the syrup!" Or, on the other hand, you might attempt to flee the encounter altogether by leaving the room or burying your head in the newspaper. Depending on your approach, your partner will feel either attacked or abandoned and will most likely lash out again. A perpetual-emotion machine will be set in gear, and you will have defeated the desired outcome, which is to have a pleasant, intimate breakfast together." So with fear of past hurts and pain and with our attachment to the security and selective memories of the past, how can we ever find hope? How can we move beyond where we are? If the ways of the past may limit us to the potential of future, what can we do? Are we doomed to repeat history?

I think our hope lies not just in our ability to change but in our ability to open up to God who leads us into a new future. Our hope does not come only from our ability to fix the economy or our relationships by using our past experiences. Our hope is rooted in God's love and redeeming power in our world. The people of Israel were not redeemed because of their ability to learn from past experiences. They were redeemed and led into the Promised Land because of God's commitment to love them even when they were at their worst. Even when they put God on trial, God didn't give up on them. God was present with them teaching them about trust and love. The relationship was the most important part of the journey, not just the events or destination. The issue for us is: do we believe and follow God or do we live in the past and get stuck in the past. Do we trust in the new future that God is calling us to or do we keep looking back?

Letting go of the past does not mean letting go of our history. It is letting go of all that holds us back from being in the fullness of God's presence. One practical way of living a life that is open to and trusting of God's leading is through a prayer called the Welcoming Prayer which is in your Faith in Action piece. We worship and pray, yet we often find ourselves reacting in negative ways that don't match our spiritual commitments. The Welcoming Prayer is a way to help us focus on our relationship with God even in the midst of negative feelings and experiences. It does not have to take a long time. As you find yourself in a place of anger, hatred, frustration, sadness, anxiety, fear, guilt, or loneliness, you may choose to follow the movements of this prayer:

FOCUS- sink into the energy of your feeling (pain, anger, hurt, sadness, etc.)

WELCOME – Invite the Holy Spirit to dwell in you with all these feelings

LET GO – (depending on the situation, state one of the following intentions as a prayer)

“I let go of my desire for control/power”

“I let go of my desire for affection/esteem”

“I let go of my desire for security”

“I let go of my desire to change (this situation, feeling, emotion, body sensation, commentary or event.”

A Swedish legend tells that one day around noon there was a deep stillness over all the forest. The birds had tucked their heads under their wings, and everything was at rest. Then a bird popped his head up and asked, “What is life?” Everyone was struck by this profound question. A rose was just emerging from her bud, and was opening up one shy petal after another, rejoicing in the newly discovered sunlight. “Life is a Becoming,” she said. The butterfly was less philosophical. He flew happily from one flower to another, snacking everywhere on the delicious nectar. “Life is a pure pleasure and sunshine,” he announced. Down on the ground, an ant was laboring under the weight of a piece of straw ten times his size. He said, “Life is nothing but toil and sweat and strain.” There might have been quite an argument about the meaning of life, had not a fine rain begun to fall, and the rain spoke: “Life consists of tears, nothing but tears.” High above the forest, an eagle swooped, making majestic curves in the sky. “Life is a constant striving upwards,” said the eagle. Night fell and soon a man came home staggering from a party. He said, “Life is a constant search for happiness, and a string of disappointments.” After the long, dark night, at last dawn came, rising pink on the eastern skyline. The dawn said, “Just as I, the dawn, am the start of the new day, so life is the beginning of eternity.” God is the beginning of all hope, may we trust and hope in God's love now and forevermore. Amen.