



Sunday, June 28, 2020
Sermon Series: Didn't See It Coming

How Regular Change Keeps You in the Game
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Exodus 16:1-12 NRSV

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel 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 fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴ 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, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸ And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹² "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.'" "

Today we're talking about a subject that's bound to get people's attention: change! I'd love to see a show of hands: how many of you respond well to change? Anybody? I'm guessing there are not too many hands up in the air.

I've shared with some of you before about my closet full of Kodak Carousel slide trays. I must have 25-30 of them jammed into my closet, each one holding 140 slides. For years I took Kodachrome slides - I loved the color saturation. I took so many that I might have inspired Simon and Garfunkel to write a song about me: Kodachrome 64. At Christmastime, my extended family would gather. I'd fill up a couple of trays of vacation pictures and - there's no delicate way to put this - foist them on my family. They seemed interested, but maybe they were just being nice.

One day I was in Walgreens trying to buy more slide film...for more slide shows. I asked the young man with the nametag identifying himself as a "photo-specialist" if they had any Kodachrome 64 film. I'll never forget his response. He said, "What's film?" This photo-specialist had no idea. In a world in which change is all too common, that one stung. I suddenly felt older and a lot more set-in-my-ways than I cared to admit.

I'll be honest: it took me quite a while to change my photography ways. I spent time lamenting the change and wishing for the good old days. But eventually, I got something called a digital camera, and then a few years later I replaced my flip-phone with a smart phone, which actually had a built-in digital camera. To make a long story short: I haven't inserted a roll of Kodachrome 64 into a camera for at least 15 years.

Any of you got a story like this to tell? Sure you do. Change is hard. But here's the truth: the culture around us never asks permission. Things just change. Either we go along with that change...or we hold on to the way things have been for dear life.

Feelings of nostalgia are sure to come. Those feelings might be related to everything from the pop music we grew up listening to, to the shag green carpeting in our living rooms, to the movies we went to see in the theater. Sometimes that nostalgia goes deeper. We get concerned when our children grow up with different political views than ours or when they don't embrace the religious tradition in which they were raised. Then what? Do we accept them for what they've become...or try like crazy to change them back? You know as well as I, these sorts of issues can be profoundly unsettling.

The people of Israel were feeling nostalgic. God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They were out in the wilderness, a mere forty-five days into the journey. Moses and Aaron were leading them. They stopped at a lush oasis named Elim. The people got something to eat and drink. But eventually they had to leave. They were on the way to the Promised Land. They'd been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years, but now they were forming an identity as the "congregation" of Israel - that's what the story calls them. They had a

long way to go. And as they went, they were developing a relationship with this God named Yahweh who had delivered them.

It didn't take long before the Israelites ran short of food. And the complaints against Moses and Aaron started coming. Believe it or not, these newly-freed slaves were suddenly nostalgic about the good-old-days back in Egypt. Maybe those days weren't all that good, but at least they had enough to eat. Suddenly a food crisis turned into a faith crisis. And it was all Moses and Aaron could do to keep the congregation of Israel moving toward the Promised Land.

In the middle of that faith crisis, God provided manna and quail for the people to eat. It's important to see these gifts for what they were: provisions from heaven, yes, and yet they came out of natural phenomena in the Sinai Peninsula. Manna came from a type of plant lice. The lice punctured the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excreted a yellowish-white flake. It had a sweet taste and was rich in carbohydrates. It could be baked into a kind of bread. Morning was the best time to eat it. Related to this were the quail. These were migratory birds flying in from Africa or blown in from the Mediterranean Sea. They were exhausted enough to be caught by hand. The quail became their evening meal.

Why do I mention the naturalness of these gifts? Because it's so easy to picture them as falling straight out of heaven – as one-of-a-kind miracles – something we ourselves could never experience. But think about it: if God's gifts come in everyday, natural ways, then maybe there can be help for us when our faith is in crisis. Maybe, when faced with change, we will find God's help in the people and events and medicine and technology all around us. Maybe we can even keep our complaints to a minimum and learn to trust the new things God has in store for us in the here and now.

Want an example of this? I called Peggy Armstrong for her 87th birthday this past week. I missed it by a day because Peggy was a bit too popular on the actual day and wasn't answering her phone. Peggy told me she'd had a splendid birthday. In years past, she'd always invited a group over for an open house. But this year, in the midst of COVID-19, adjustments had to be made. When friends called, Peggy told them they could surely come by, but they needed to bring with them a lawn chair and a mask. They sat in her garage, with an appropriate distance between them. Peggy told me that twelve of her friends came by to celebrate – one or two at a time. In the middle of a pandemic, Peggy made the most of her birthday, and she was grateful for every minute of it.

Peggy's celebration sounds a little like manna and quail to me – God providing for us out of the ordinary stuff of life. Depending on how we view these

provisions, they become little miracles that remind us of our identity and value as children of God.

Here's something to keep in mind: the older we get, the harder change can be for us, especially when we don't see it coming. As church staff trying to lead in the midst of COVID, we struggle to figure out what to do next. I came across a survey of pastors recently: only 18 percent of them felt completely competent to lead in this moment. This probably goes for our entire staff at Zumbro. We're making this up as we go. Then again, we're starting to see that change - like it or not - is giving us opportunities. Our Youth and Young Adult Minister, Jen Gruendler, sees technology as an opportunity to reach out to young adults who have left the church and maybe bring them closer to Jesus in the process. Our Children and Family Minister, Janette Reeves, led a virtual Vacation Bible School for our kids this past week, and over 100 of them were a part of it. Our Director of Music, Kristy Giere, recently attended a virtual music conference. It attracted people from all over the world. There wasn't much singing or choral music or wind instruments, but one thing was abundantly clear: people needed to worship.

This is where our work often gets challenging. Many churches have a hard time with change and they resist it at every turn. They end up in arguments over how to do worship, or who gets to lead, or who is welcome and who is not.

Like ancient Israel, it sometimes feels like we're out in the wilderness and can't find our way home. Back to the survey of pastors: I want to be part of that 18% who feel completely competent to lead in this moment, but truthfully, I feel more competent some days than others.

As we spend time in the wilderness, there are three particular questions about change I feel a need to be asking: First, *am I open to being a student of the culture around me...or do I simply push it away?* The Rochester Post-Bulletin has been dismantling their printing press. That's been a hard thing for Jeff Lansing of Zumbro to witness. Jeff played an active role in that printing for years. Now the Post-Bulletin is going to put out a printed edition two days a week, and the rest of the days will be digital. I give them a lot of credit: they're working hard to be in the news business and not simply in the newspaper business.

Churches today are wrestling with a similar issue: are we going to think of ourselves as a digital organization with a physical presence, or a physical organization with a digital presence? As I strive to be a student of culture, that's a critically important question for me - and us - to ask.

A second question about change: *Am I willing to surround myself with younger people?* Before COVID, I'd never heard of Zoom and I knew next to nothing about streaming. I'm not very techie, but I know some people who are, and I need to surround myself with them. The next staff person we hire at Zumbro probably shouldn't be a pastor but someone who can keep our technology running smoothly. Guess what? Younger people don't always think like those of us who are older. They stretch us and force us to think differently about the world in which we live. I need those sorts of people in my life, and so do we at Zumbro.

A third, and most important, question about change: *as a leader in the church, do I firmly believe that the mission is more important than the method?* As I said earlier, churches often get hung up on the "method" side of things. When we do, I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul who left behind a lifetime of commitment to Jewish law for the sake of reaching a Gentile audience. He left behind a method for a mission, and he brought life and hope to a whole lot of people as he did.

Are there days when we worry more about the method than the mission? Please hear me: *building bridges of understanding and peace, reaching out with compassion, and sharing the hope of Jesus* could not be more important in our world today, no matter how we choose to do it. We must work tirelessly to keep our mission – and not simply our methods – front and center.

As I see it, our journey through COVID-19 has a lot in common with Israel's long and winding journey through the wilderness. Time and again, we will be called to change and head in a different direction. Maybe this pandemic will soon be over, but maybe it won't. We might long to return to the good old days back in Egypt, but when we are, we're called to trust that, with God's help, our best days are still ahead. Do you believe that?

The congregation of Israel formed a new identity in the wilderness. Maybe we will too. They forged a relationship with a God they had not known in quite the same way. Maybe we will too. They experienced everyday gifts of manna and quail along the way. Maybe we will too. One day at a time, one month at a time, one year at a time, they experienced change, and that change led to transformation, and they ended up with a faith they did not have before. Maybe we will too.

Friends, in the midst of our transformation, maybe we will learn to trust the new things God has in store for us here and now. We might not like them, at least not at first. We might have a hard time getting to the Promised Land. But as I see it, it beats going back to Egypt every time. Amen.

