

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2021

“Press On!”

We have been considering the Covenants God made with his people - and by extension us. Today we come to a text we might call, “*trouble in paradise.*” The children of Israel have been brought out of the house of bondage - a powerful act of deliverance - an act of love. Last week we explored how God gave them *guidelines for living as free people.* But it seems they struggle with how to *live into* this new life.

And why wouldn't they struggle? We do. Change is hard for us in almost any form - *even when the new will redeem us.* It feels natural to resist the promise of what might if we have to shift and change for it.

Buyer's remorse is at the heart of our passage today. *Freedom has been won - but not an easy life.* Exodus is happening - but it is into the desert. The complaints of the children of Israel are rooted in fear and mistrust. “*Did you bring us out here in the desert to die? Do they really expect* Moses to say, “*Oops, ...sorry....?*”

While they complain about Moses - their dis-satisfaction goes deeper. The harshness of the complaint and God's response reflect *the deeply serious spiritual danger of wanting to “go back”.* It is a natural and self-defeating human pattern to imagine if we could just go back to **what we had** - to **who we were** - *to some moment...*everything would be OK.

But friends, it is an illusion – a mirage in the desert. ***There is no going back.*** How do you think the children of Israel would be received by the Egyptians whose first born children died in the process of their leaving? Why did God send Moses in the first place? Because they were miserable! **There is no going back - only forward.**

We aren't very good at remembering what really was when we yearn for the past. ***When imagine a simpler time and forget that a lot of what***

complicates our lives also makes them better. Technology complicates and makes our lives better. We are sometimes frustrated with the uncertainty and shifting of our culture and yearn for a time when it seemed like everything was settled – of course, *professional women, people of color, and those with same gender attraction...*to name a few... might not look back and call the past, “*the good old days.*” *Our imagined yearned for past* was not better for everyone.

God’s response in this passage is quite stunning. Doesn’t it feel like an overreaction? After all, there are other times in the exodus when the people complain and God gives them what they asked for. Why not here? The difference seems to be **letting our needs and desires be known to God** - which we should do – and **attacking God’s character as we abandon all sense of trust and relationship.** When we give up on covenant with God, it brings us to a place of disaster. The difference is everything.

The snake lifted up on the pole was a powerful reminder of **the difference between looking to God for life and deciding God has failed us.** So, the children of Israel kept it. Remembrances in our lives of the *powerful presence and work of God* are helpful. *Until we look at the gifts of God as if they are God’s very self* – and we worship the gift instead of the giver. Over time the bronze snake became an object of worship - and in the sweeping reforms of King Hezekiah the snake was destroyed as **it had become an obstacle to a life in covenant with God rather than an encouraging reminder.** In *the desert* they wanted to go *back to Egypt...*settled *in the land* of Israel they wanted to go back to a time they imagined God seemed closer - *the exodus.* Oh, the humanity!

The past is always with us – but we are not to live in it. The future is unknown – but we are not to fear it. We live in the present - and by grace - *we live in covenant with God in every moment of every day.*

We have almost always misunderstood the circumstances when we lose heart. Even when it is hot, dry and without necessities. God is never our enemy. God is faithful – even when there is trouble in paradise, there is always grace available to press on. So, let’s do that.