



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 30, 2018

“The Good Ol’ Days”

(Numbers 11:4-6)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Now the rabble that was among [the children of Israel] had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (Nu. 11:4-6).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Everlasting Father, source of every blessing, mercifully direct and govern us by Your Holy Spirit that we may complete the works You have prepared for us to do; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

A couple of weeks ago, that first night in Rome, I went for a walk downtown and stumbled into the Roman forum. It's a rectangular plaza filled with the ruins of the government buildings of the ancient Roman Empire. It's right there in the heart of Rome and is beautifully lit up at night. One of the best preserved structures is Trajan's Column. Emperor Trajan had it built to commemorate his victory over the kingdom of Dacia, present day Romania. That war started in 101 A.D. The column was completed in the year 113 AD. It's about 12 stories high, and is a column made of marble drums, each weighing 32 tons, each 12 feet in diameter. They're placed one on top of another. On the inside, there's a spiral staircase carved out of the marble that goes to the top. On the outside, carved into the marble, is the story of Roman victories over those barbarians to the north. Of course, the emperor is the hero of the story carved into the column. He's a sort of god-like figure; and indeed they were trying to promote emperor worship. He appears 58 times as the wise, brave and victorious emperor. It's basically a propaganda piece which says "Look at what I've accomplished. No barbarian kingdom can match the Roman Empire, especially when led by me, Emperor Trajan."

Now, contrast all that with how Moses in Scripture depicts himself and the Israelites. In our text, and, in fact, throughout Scripture the story of the chosen people of God is not an epic tale of national heroism. It's not a glorious record of people willing to suffer hardship for the sake of freedom and independence. No, in the Bible the people are either complaining or revolting against God. Even Moses, who wrote the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) . . . he doesn't gloss over any of his own failures or weaknesses, but paints himself realistically. He makes an honest assessment of himself and the people, and it's not pretty.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Whenever Hollywood cranks out a movie about [Moses], they always give the part to somebody

like Charlton Heston with some fake whiskers glued on. The truth of it is he probably looked a lot more like Tevye the milkman after ten rounds with Mohammed Ali. Forty years of tramping around the wilderness with the Israelites was enough to take it out of anybody. When they weren't raising [heck] about running out of food, they were raising it about running out of water. There were always hankering after the fleshpots of Egypt and making bitter remarks about how they should have stayed home and let well enough alone. As soon as his back was turned, they started whooping it up around the Golden Calf, and when somebody stood up and said Moses ought to be thrown out, the motion was seconded by thousands. Any spare time he had left after taking care of things like that he spent trying to persuade God not to wipe them out altogether as they deserved" (Peculiar Treasures, p. 125).

The contrast is stunning between the record of Trajan and Roman history as recorded by Trajan, and the record of Moses and salvation history as recorded by Moses.

The Bible is about people, real, flesh and blood, sinful people, and how God interacts with them. It doesn't read like propaganda. It's not an anthology of brilliant military victories. It doesn't even read like a book on Christian doctrine. It's about complicated, fragmented, exhausted, sinful people. And, of course, the Bible is about God and his undeserved love, and how that love and grace intersects with real people.

In our text, once again the people are grumbling bitterly against Moses and God. They've had their fill of manna, the bread from heaven. What they want now is meat, more specifically succulent seafood. Can you imagine? They're out there in the middle of the desert. God has been providing manna, but the miracle of the manna has become so dependable, so predictable, reliable and commonplace that they don't even think of it as a miracle anymore. It doesn't astonish them. They don't feel grateful for it. To the contrary, they've grown weary of it, and are complaining about it. Quote, "There is nothing at all but this manna to

look at.” As they air their grievances, notice how their memory is playing tricks on them, ignoring the brutality of slave days, and exaggerating how well they ate. ““Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” They make slavery under Pharaoh sound like the buffet line at Caesar’s Palace. They’re looking at their own history through rose-colored glasses . . . so much so that they’re even longing for the good ol’ days under Egyptian slavery. Someone quipped that nothing is more responsible for the “good old days” than a bad memory.

Do you think we ever do that? Does your brain ever scrub up history and make it look better than it really was? Do you ever long for those simpler times, quieter times, without remembering the tuberculosis or the polio or the iron lungs? Ever long for the days of Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas” without thinking about all that hot, lethal lead flying through the air during WWII? Ever long for the days of the Beatles and the Beach Boys without remembering Vietnam, and the Cold War, and all those assassinations, and race riots, when it felt like the country was falling apart at the seams? Do we ever scrub up history and make it better than it really was?

I’ve been told by others who have lost their spouses that over time, one forgets many of the little annoyances and painful memories of the marriage, and eventually remembers mostly just good things, positive things. There’s grace in that, for sure, but there are probably hidden dangers in that too, when the brain starts building within itself a shrine dedicated to the deceased.

Reading obituaries or listening to eulogies, have you noticed how often the words “never” and “always” are used to describe the deceased? “She never had a bad word to say about anyone.” “He was always willing to help others.” “Never” and “always” are probably words we shouldn’t use

in reference to people, because people are more complicated than that.

Some of you may be thinking, “What’s the real harm in yearning for past days? What’s the real harm in scrubbing up our memory of history and thinking more positively of it? What’s the harm in thinking more highly about a person in death than we thought about them in life?”

Well first, let’s start with our text. What’s the real harm in longing for the “fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.” They certainly weren’t giving thanks to God for their present day gifts, were they? They weren’t praising God for the gift of manna. In fact, they resented God that they didn’t have fresh seafood now. Their rosy view of history may have even helped them despise the good gifts that God was presently giving them, like freedom from slavery, and the manna from heaven, and the promise of their own land one day, and best of all the covenantal promise to be their God. But no, they didn’t see any of it. They didn’t see present blessings or future promises because they were yearning for the good ol’ days.

Second, it’s never wise to build our lives on half-truths and lies. Even as Moses describes himself realistically in Scripture, so we want to have an honest assessment about ourselves, our history. We want to be truthful about history, truthful about ourselves, truthful about others even in death. Instead of building shrines in our minds to someone else, it seems to me that space should be reserved for God alone. There is always that risk of idolatry, right? A lot of people around the world worship deceased family members. Falling into that is easier than we think, but God says he’s jealous, and doesn’t want to share his glory with another.

Third, as we yearn for the good ol’ days, it becomes easy to miss what new things God is doing today. He is always up to something new. He has new challenges for us, new plans, new people to care for and serve. God is not stuck in the decades past. He’s far more concerned about the present and the future. Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he

is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

And listen to Revelation 21, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” God’s Word is not just about His historic grace and mercy. It’s also about his present tense grace and mercy, and his future promises.

Someone once said we should consider the remarkable possibility that the good old days are now! That life is only going to get more complicated, loud and difficult. Enjoy the day at hand and live in it fully and give thanks to God for it.

The good ol’ days. Those days, they’ve served their purpose. We can’t go back; nor do we really want to because God has new things in mind for us. Paul said it this way. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

Earlier I said we should be careful about using the words “always” and “never” in reference to people because people are complicated and fragmented. In lots of ways, God isn’t nearly so complicated. God will always remember his promises; he will never forget them. Always and never. God will always forgive the sins of those who are penitent. He will never turn them away. God will always be working through his Word; it will never return to him empty. God will always be in His Supper for us and for our forgiveness; he will never feed us just empty bread and wine. God will always hear and answer our prayers. He will never turn a deaf ear to us. God will always be working to preserve us in the faith; he will never sweep us away in frustration. A bruised reed he will never break, a smoldering wick he will never snuff out. God will always remember you. See, he has engraved you in the palm of his hands; he will never forget you.

Clearly, God blessed us richly in years past, and we give thanks to God for those blessings. But we also know,

he's not done. If we have eyes to see, we'll see he's heaping grace upon grace, and there's still more to come, much more. I'm thinking now of that day when "He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

When the Lord finally brings us home we're not going to miss these days or this life. We're not going to want to come back, even for a nostalgic look around. In Isaiah 65, God says, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (Is. 65:17). That is, the joy of heaven will not be marred by any painful memories of this temporal life. Even now, God is preparing a place for us, a home, with all the saints, and with Him, and in a communion where nothing can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

