***AH, THE GOOD OLD DAYS!***

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Texts: Numbers 11:1-6, 10-25 and Mark 9:38-41, 49-50

For my birthday a few years ago, my loving wife gave me a touching card that included a “Senior Birthday Prayer” that read as follows:

*God, grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway,*

*the good fortune to run into the ones* I do,

*and the eyesight to tell the difference.*

Thankfully I am not yet senior enough to have those words become my prayer – though that day may not be far away – but there is nevertheless some selective memory, regardless of senility, that colors all our recollections of past events and old friends and experiences. You can watch a movie from your youth that you remember as being hilarious, only to find yourself asking, “I wonder what it was that I found so funny?” Or maybe you remember a time when life seemed great, a time when life was good for everyone as you recall, selectively forgetting the more miserable aspects of those good old days for yourself or for others.

That is what those who created the myth of the Lost Cause tried to do in revising memories of the Civil War, contending that it was never about slavery despite the fact that the secession documents of every state mention slavery specifically and the Vice-President of the Confederacy confirmed in a speech that slavery was exactly what the war was about. Within my lifetime I have heard folks talk about the 1950s as “the good old days” even though those days clearly were not good for many Black folks who were the victims of racist lynchings, forced segregation, and persistent discrimination, or for Korean War veterans who were wounded in that bloody conflict, or for those who endured vicious attacks by Joseph McCarthy. Today we see attempts to revise history by those who refer to the January 6 attack on the Capitol as nothing more than tourists sight-seeing or patriots protesting peacefully despite the brandishing of weapons, the voiced threats, the damage inflicted, and the police officers injured in defending our democracy. Memory can be a fragile thing, skewing our recall of past events or allowing us to selectively recall what really happened in days gone by.

So it was for the people of Israel as they faced hardships in traversing the wilderness to which they had been delivered. God had heard their suffering cries as they endured bondage in Egypt and so sent Moses to deliver them. Yet when times got tough in the desert through which Moses led them, all of a sudden their memories of that time in Egypt changed from suffering enslavement to ‘the good old days.” You heard it in the text in Numbers this morning. God had responded to their cries of hunger with manna to eat – each morning, every morning. But they had tired of the manna and, so they wept and whined and wistfully harkened back to better days:

*Remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; (they sound like foodies for the New York Times!) but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing but this manna to look at.*

Their memories of Egypt had suddenly gone from a sandy hell to the Garden of Eden! How quickly they forgot the burdens of slavery, the pain inflicted by Egyptian taskmasters, and the killing of their babies by Pharaoh. How quickly they moved on from gratitude to God for delivering them at the Red Sea and providing water at Meribah and manna to satisfy their hunger! With ungrateful hearts they whined about having to eat that same life-giving manna that God provided for them day after day!

We too tend to forget our blessings and ignore what God has done for us as we raise to God complaints about what God has NOT done for us lately! We have short memories of our blessings, but long memories of our grievances! “*If you want a surefire formula for happiness, then constantly notice all the wonderful gifts in your life and give thanks for them on a daily basis*,” writes Martin Thielen.[[1]](#endnote-1) He urges us to make gratitude a daily practice, a way of living, a way of seeing the world. Always giving thanks can help us regain perspective about our current circumstances. Making thanks-giving a daily practice can open our eyes to blessings we might otherwise fail to see. Finding silver linings in the storm clouds around us can be a source of encouragement or hope. Rather than just longing for the “good old days”, might you recognize the ways in which God is blessing you in the here and now, and give thanks for those blessings?

In this pandemic we have had a host of grievances to raise to God; it has been a long 18 months! But there also have been blessings in the midst of it all. Life has changed in many ways, and while we may long for “the good old days” pre-pandemic, we may find that while some things would indeed be an improvement on our present circumstances – like getting rid of masks and feeling comfortable gathering in large groups again – some things have changed for the better – like appreciating time with friends and family, livestreaming our worship services, and for some folks, working from home. If we only raise to God the complaints and fail to recognize the signs of God at work in our midst to bless us, then the pandemic can seem overwhelming and the future bleak. But if day to day we look for God’s blessings and recall them even as we raise to God our pleas for help, then we may find encouragement to keep on keeping on and to do the right thing, knowing that God is still with us.

It is not just individuals that benefit from such gratitude; it is all of us. As Diana Butler Bass writes:

*Social scientists have extolled gratitude as a personal path to peace, health, and contentment. Giving thanks, however, is more than a private practice; those same researchers insist that gratitude is socially beneficial and strengthens communities. Gratitude is about ‘me,’ and it is about ‘we*.’[[2]](#endnote-2)

The same might be said about ingratitude – it too is about “me” and “we”. It can turn individual lament into community grievance as “Woe is me!” becomes “Woe is us!” Such was the lived experience of the ungrateful people of Israel in the wilderness! Might daily practices of gratitude help us as individuals and as a community to weather this viral storm a little more graciously, a little more patiently, a little more hopefully, a little more thankfully, a little more faithfully?

But it was not only the people of Israel who had complaints to raise to God. Moses too voiced his frustration, for it was God who had called him to shepherd the stubborn people of Israel through the wilderness. He had never volunteered for that duty! The people cried out to God, but they complained to Moses and expected him to be the one to solve their problems as God’s agent. Moses could not meet their needs on his own, yet he bore the brunt of their discontent. God had called to him from that Burning Bush and stuck him with this whiny group of refugees who were so quick to recall how wonderful things had been in the good old days in Egypt. He had risked life and limb to do what God asked, and here he was besieged by their complaints. It all seemed too much for Moses, and he was ready to throw in the towel with his lament: “*Lord, if this is the way you are going to treat me, then put me out of my misery and let me die!*” I can’t help but wonder if his cry made God realize that too much had been placed on Moses’ shoulders; divine help was always there, but Moses needed some human help as well to deal with these cranky, ungrateful people.

God’s solution was to have Moses choose 70 elders to help him lead the people. From the tribes of Israel, Moses selected leaders to help address the people’s needs, and the Lord touched them all with some of that divine Spirit with which the Lord had blessed Moses. It was a little like our ordination of elders when we lay hands upon them and ask for God’s Spirit to be poured out on them so that they might do what they could not do alone. For Moses and for us ever since, ministry is a shared calling. We do not serve alone!

God’s Spirit works in and through us today as it did through Moses, Eldad, Medad, and those other 68 elders in Israel, and through those disciples casting out demons in Jesus’ name in John’s Gospel. But there are those who fear the power of the Spirit – like Joshua who saw it as a threat to Moses’ leadership or the disciple John who feared it was a threat to Jesus if it was not confined to his followers. Neither Moses nor Jesus seemed threatened. They trusted that if it was indeed God’s Spirit then it would accomplish good things. And neither do we need to be afraid of the Spirit at work in our midst, even if that means that it brings to us some of that dreaded word - CHANGE!

Are you open to the changes God’s Spirit might bring about as we move through this pandemic, or are you longing for “the good old pre-pandemic days” when we all ate cucumbers and melons? As theologian Shirley Guthrie observes:

*People who like things the way they are (or used to be), who benefit from the status quo in church and world, who therefore value stability, permanence, decency and order above everything else - such people are suspicious and afraid of the Holy Spirit, and too much talk about the Spirit makes them nervous and defensive. But people who suffer and see no way out of suffering, who are enslaved and oppressed by their own and others' sinfulness and injustice - they yearn for the coming of the Spirit. For the Spirit is not just the Lord and Giver of life but the Lord and Giver of new life - to individuals, to churches, and to political, social, and economic structures[[3]](#endnote-3).*

Things will change as the Spirit leads us though this pandemic, but we need not fear that change. Moses didn’t. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” said Moses. He welcomed the coming of the Spirit, wished for more of the Spirit upon the people, without concern for the changes it would mean for his life.

Now those events in the wilderness happened a long time ago in a desert far, far away. But their experience there can inform us in the midst of this 21st century pandemic. By looking for things for which to give thanks each day, by working together in ministry, and by trusting God’s Spirit to work in our midst to bring about positive change, we just might weather this pandemic and the challenges we face day to day and find ourselves blessed beyond what we expected or imagined possible. Who knows, we may even find that “the good old days” pale in comparison with the wonderful days to come, and so dare to pray, “Come, Spirit! Come!” Amen

1. Martin Thielen, *Searching for Happiness*, Westminster John Knox Press: 2016, p. 102-103 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Shirley Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed*, p.83 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)