

“There’s No Going Back”  
August 4, 2024  
Scripture: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35

I have never had to leave a home. The house where I grew up is where my mother still lives and was built by my great, great grandfather in the 1870’s. I know what it’s like to have generational roots in a community, but not what it’s like to leave everything behind. So, I really can’t imagine how it must feel to be forced to uproot yourself and your family from a home because of war or persecution or famine and move everything to an entirely new place. I’ve never been a refugee, but I do know that people don’t just pack up everything and leave a place on a whim. They go through that because home has become intolerable and threatening.

The Israelites in the stories from Exodus were glad to get away from enslavement in Egypt. We’re told they were the victims of a slow, systematic genocide, their male children executed at birth. The forced labor they endured became harsher and harsher. And their hearts, and voices I’m sure, cried out for release. They followed Moses who spoke on behalf of a God they had heard of, but probably knew little about. But they trusted their leader to get them through the desert to a new home where they could start over again.

So, it might seem odd to hear that they were complaining. But, again, I don’t know what it’s like to be a refugee. When you leave a place with hopes of something better but it all seems to get worse, maybe a little complaining is justified. It’s easy for us to criticize them from our comfortable vantage point. On the other hand, I’ve heard people complain about all sorts of things from not finding the right brand of cereal to being bumped from a flight to a resort for vacation with as much bitterness as the Israelites afraid of starving in the desert. We know how to complain; and it doesn’t take much to set us off. So, maybe we can cut them a little slack.

And their complaints weren’t unheeded. God heard them. And immediately took action to respond. How serious were they, do you think, when they seemed to pine for the fleshpots of Egypt? I imagine if Moses had called their bluff and told them to pack it all up and go back, they wouldn’t have gone for that. How could they? Once they set their hearts on freedom, there was no going back. Instead they had to learn to trust in a future they couldn’t fully envision. And trust that God’s provision would make that future possible. Because going back was not an option.

In one of his autobiographies Frederick Douglass, the formerly enslaved man who became a powerful abolitionist, describes the moment he was free. It was when he defended himself against his enslaver. He says, “However long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact!” His inner being was changed in that moment and there was no going back. The Israelites could no more return to Egypt than Douglass could think of himself again as a slave. And like them, he would be given the sustenance he needed to complete his journey. He would find manna in the desert to carry him to the Promised Land.

When we set our sight on the future, we become something new. As Paul puts it, “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. See! The past is finished and gone; everything is fresh and new.”

That's what Jesus offers the crowds who track him down and beg for more. They're looking for something to satisfy them in the moment. They want to see his parlor trick of pulling bread and fish out of thin air. But that was what some would call "a finger pointing to the moon." Jesus offers them something more, something lasting, so they'll never hunger or thirst again.

He offers them a new identity, a new way of thinking about themselves and of seeing the world around them. And he makes no apologies: he says he embodies that new identity. He is the bread, the manna, they're looking for. A little later in this chapter he'll go so far as to say, "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." Understand, Jesus isn't speaking in literal terms; he's speaking metaphorically, even though the people's reaction to that claim will be pretty uneasy. His point, though, when he says "I am the bread of life," is to invite them to put their trust in him and the way of knowing God he embodies.

When we do that, like the Hebrews escaping Egypt, there's no going back. Once we have identified ourselves fully with Christ and see the world through the lens he provides we are not the same. But that's only true so long as we remain mindful of that new identity. Some people have trouble getting their minds around the idea that faith is a journey. That we're constantly on the way to becoming one with Christ, yet never fully there. I understand that. We like destinations. We like arriving. We like being finished, accomplishing a task. But scripture isn't very interested in our accomplishments. What we find here is guidance on the way, bread for the journey; and the journey never ends. To use an old saying, "The journey is the destination."

The great 4<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote: "The soul, having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for him but does not find him. She calls on him, though he cannot be reached by any word, and she is told by the watchmen that she is in love with the unattainable, and that the object of her love cannot be apprehended. But the veil of her grief is lifted when she learns that the object of her desire consists of constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her ascent." It's a beautiful image of how we move toward Christ, looking for God's presence everywhere we turn in the knowledge that we are not alone on this journey but move within the circle of God's love.

And we carry within us a deep hunger for God. When that crowd followed Jesus and the disciples up the shore of Galilee, they may have only wanted to see more tricks, but something deeper in them was hungry for more than just bread. And it doesn't take much for Jesus to tap into that hunger. "Give us this bread always," they beg. He offers himself in response.

We must not, we cannot, settle for anything less. If we've set our sight on Christ and are committed to the journey he calls us on, then there's no going back. Christ calls us to find our life in him, in the life he gives. The life Christ gives is marked by compassion and empathy. It's not lived in a bubble cut off from the real world. It engages the world and meets the world's hunger with real food. Just as God responded immediately to the Israelites complaints we are called to hear the cries of those around us and respond in ways that satisfy their needs. Just as Christ becomes food and drink for us, we are called to bring nourishment to others.

And there will be times when we'll feel lost. There'll be times when we'll wonder if it's all worth it. We might even look back wistfully, longing for easier, more certain days. But the joy we find in the presence of Christ will carry us on. Love is its own reward. Following the path of Christ, no matter how difficult it can be at times, gives us all the sustenance we need to keep going.

So, when we fear our efforts are in vain or we look around us and see that nothing seems to change, we are encouraged to commit ourselves more fully to the way of Christ. In a world filled with turmoil and rancor and fear, we are called to follow the path of compassion, love and hope. We meet hostility with generosity; we meet indifference with love; we meet hatred with compassion; we meet despair with hope. This is the journey we're called to make with Christ, to allow our souls to be fed with bread to satisfy our hunger so we can be strengthened to meet the hunger of the world.

Amen