

Walking forwards, looking back (Exodus 16:2-15)

There is a very challenging poem that I came across recently called 'Leaving Egypt', it says:

*I carry Egypt with me
in a drawstring pocket
that I keep close at my side,
so that I can feel the nestled weight
of its sand and stone
and endless servitude.
Sometimes i run my thumb
along its gathered edge,
wondering if I should -
if maybe I could -
open that pocket,
just for a minute,
quick-like and easy,
so that I might feel
those sharp-edged stones,
sun-warmed and ancient
and well-trodden
by Pharaohs and asps.*

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Over the past few weeks we have been reflecting on the story of the Exodus and the journey of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promise land of God.

The first part of the story was full of drama and action – the burning bush, wrestling with Pharaoh, plagues, Passover and the miracles at the red sea, but now the Hebrew people are a couple of months into what is proving to be a difficult journey through an inhospitable wilderness and the anticipation and excitement of 'freedom' is beginning to wear off.

When we pick up the story this morning the Hebrew people are complaining against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. *“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.”*

Although the journey has barely begun, this is the third time that the Hebrew people have switched from praise and joy, to panic and complaint:

The grumbling began almost as soon as they left Egypt. At the shores of the Red Sea, when they saw that the Egyptian army was pursuing, they cried, *“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”* (Exodus 14:11). God intervened, allowing the people to cross in safety and they celebrated their miraculous deliverance.

Only a few days later, however, worried about water supplies in the wilderness, the people begin to grumble again, saying, *“What shall we drink?”* (Exodus 15:24). God provided fresh water and they continued on their journey.

Now as they face the reality of the harshness and deprivation of their circumstances, the complaints pour forth again *“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”*.

“Egypt, Egypt, Egypt” The Hebrew people seem to have fallen into the trap of trying to walk forwards while looking back. Their discomfort in the present and their fear for the future has them ready to abandon freedom and run straight back to slavery in Egypt.

For those of us watching from a distance, this may seem like utterly irrational behaviour, but as they struggle to place their faith in God, the uncertainty and chaos of life on the journey makes the Hebrew people long for what was known and predictable, even if it was captivity and oppression. As one scholar noted, *“It took one day to get the Hebrews out of Egypt; it took forty years to get Egypt out of the Hebrews.”*

There is something of a pattern to the people’s complaining throughout the exodus story. When they encounter obstacles or times of discomfort or fear, the people respond not by turning to God but by re-turning to their memories of the past. When they do so, they practise a sort of ‘wilful forgetfulness’ so that in their minds the past appears better than the present – they reminisce about lives of comfort and abundance that bear little resemblance to the harsh servitude that they endured in Egypt. *“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”*.

You might say that the Hebrew people were suffering from ‘nostalgia’, the sort of nostalgia that embellishes memories; that runs them through a filter which obscures the negative and accentuates the positive, which blurs the edges and gives everything a dreamy rose coloured glow. The sort of nostalgia that causes stagnation and despondency because it is not real and can never be attained again.

The Hebrew people could not go back to Egypt, however as long as they believed they could it impacted their ability to face the challenges of the present and to step into the future. Continuing to ‘carry Egypt with them in their pocket’ was not only painful but also counter-productive.

The great comfort in this passage is that God hears the complaints of the Hebrew people and responds in compassion. God understands how difficult it is to walk out of slavery into freedom, to leave the past behind and believe in a better future. God recognises their insecurity and anxiety and responds by providing for their needs.

Of course it’s not just the Hebrew people that fall into the trap of trying to walk forwards while looking back.

Change is unavoidable, and we encounter it in every aspect of our lives - from physical growth to scientific progress. At the same time we long for stability and security, we find change unsettling and uncomfortable, and like the Hebrew people we often feel overwhelmed by the present and afraid for the future.

In these moments it is tempting to wish that we could return to a time that was easier or simpler, to long for the ‘good old days’ when things made sense and the world seemed to be a better place.

While there is nothing wrong with reminiscing about the past or holding onto fond memories, the problem with nostalgia is that looking back makes it very difficult to walk forwards.

Nostalgia invests the past with hues and colours that it did not really have. It paints a rosy picture that may bear little resemblance to what life was really like. When we start to believe that the past was somehow better, and that the present is not what it should be, nostalgia can breed despondency and regret.

Nostalgia literally means “*the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.*” We can never go back to the good old days, and longing for what's gone will prevent us from recognising the blessings of the present and God's promise for the future. Continuing to ‘carry Egypt in our pocket’ is not only painful but also counter-productive.

Isaiah 43:18-19 says: “*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*”

God calls us into freedom and new life, but the journey will not always be easy or comfortable. We all tend to carry a little Egypt in our pocket and it can be so tempting to turn back to what we have known, to the patterns, habits or relationships that kept us captive but which are comfortable and familiar.

Today we are reminded that God understands how difficult it is to walk out of slavery into freedom, to leave the past behind and believe in a better future. God recognises our insecurity and anxiety and will provide for our needs.

God is doing a new thing in our lives, but just how long this journey takes may depend on where we are looking. Amen.