

Strike the Rock! **Exodus 17:1-7**

In-Between Space

During my 12 years in the United States, I have moved 5 times. Moving is not fun, especially, an interstate move. There are a lot more things to consider in an interstate move. When I first came to Rhode Island, I needed to change my driver's license and registration. To change them, I first needed to change my car insurance, get the title from the bank, and go to the police station for vehicle identification number verification. After everything was ready, I had to go to the DMV. As we all know, along with the necessary documents, we also need to pack patience when we go to the DMV. Right? Unfortunately, after a 4 hour wait, the DMV gave me driver's license valid for only 6 months because they couldn't verify my updated immigration status even though I had all my immigration documents with me. So I had to go through the same patience test again. Finding a primary care doctor in the Rhode Island was also much more challenging than I thought it would be. Until everything had been properly changed, I felt that I was somewhere 'in-between.' Being in an 'in-between' place is not always easy.

Like moving from one place to another, change is a part of life. Whether we like it or not, we all go through seasons of change in our lives. The 'in-between' seasons can be the most difficult times as the glimmer from what has been fades, and the hope of what is to come is still too far off to see. This is what the Israelites experienced during their time in the wilderness.

The Israelites left Egypt but they had not yet reached the promised land. They were in the 'in-between' place, the wilderness. Their old way of living didn't work in this in-between place. Ancient Egypt was an agricultural society so the Israelites might have known how to farm and grow crops, but they were now in the wilderness and their knowledge of agriculture seemed useless. They might have known what to do during the flood season of the Nile River, but they didn't know how to find waters in the wilderness. Old knowledge, old ways of doing things and old ways of living didn't help and they didn't know what to do in the wilderness. They were feeling stuck. Have you been there, the in-between place?

We Are in the In-Between Space

I often feel that we are now going through this 'in-between' place. Due to Covid-19, everything had to be changed. Normally, during this time of year, Asbury UMC would be busy preparing for our yard sale in November. Barbara and the women's group would be busy organizing and baking bread. The Men's group would be busy setting up and sorting out items on the first floor. I am pretty sure that David Dorsey would be busy polishing chinaware from the Ming dynasty. We miss the bazaar, not just for the fundraising but also for the energy and love we share as we worked together. But this year, we are not able to have the Christmas Bazaar because of Covid-19. I miss Ben and Eva sharing welcoming candy. I will miss Carl Bishop Sr. greeting people with his gentle smile. I am sure that everyone will miss this meaningful community event but in this covid-19 situation, the old way of doing our bazaar does not work and we haven't figure out what to do in this new normal.

The church is also facing a radical cultural shift. Many scholars say that we have entered post-Christendom society. Although the separation of church and state is the official government position, the church has been an important pillar of American society for many decades. Most people went to the church on Sunday morning and that was the norm of the society a few decades ago. Christianity provided the moral and spiritual foundation of the society but this time

has gone. We have to accept that the church is no longer the center of our culture. In this post-Christendom culture, we can't keep doing things the way we've always done them. But at the same time, hiring a hip, young pastor would not solve the problem. We need to figure out a new way of being a church without compromising the gospel but we don't know how we can do it yet.

After the pandemic started, I had to think of the meaning of my ministry. I tried my best to do what I could for the church. But at the same time, I felt that I was like a hamster on a wheel. I ran and ran and ran but nothing seemed to really change. What do you think of our beloved Asbury? We know something has changed in our society and we also know we need to be changed. But we still don't know how. Just like the Israelites, we are in the 'in-between' place. We don't like to be in this unusual place and time.

In-between place: a place of grace and transformation

But we also need to remember that this 'in-between' place is a place of grace and transformation. In the wilderness, the old knowledge, skills and strengths the Israelites had were useless or not enough for living. What did they need? They needed to learn to live by grace from heaven. Each and every day, they only survived by receiving manna from heaven. They also were not able to quench their thirst themselves. The Israelites repeatedly complained. "I am hungry. I am not a vegetarian! Give me meat! I am thirsty. Give me water to drink." They kept whining and complaining, but God showed his mercy and grace upon them again and again. Of course, their hearts were not easily changed.

If you pay attention to the last part of today's reading, you will notice something is missing. When the Israelites complained, "Give us water to drink," God told Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink. (17:5-6) As Moses did, the Israelites received water. But it ended with Moses calling "the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" What is missing here? Thanksgiving, gratitude. Where is joy and celebration?

The Israelites were free from the Egypt but their understanding of God was still enslaved by their understanding of Egyptian gods. In ancient Egypt, people worshipped many gods and goddesses. But the transactions between gods and people were primarily utilitarian. People offered food, drink and ointment to deities and in return, the gods provided what they needed. The Israelites wanted God to be a utilitarian satisfier of their thirst. So when their needs were not met, they immediately complained about it. But some say, "when the transaction between God and God's people becomes so utilitarian, what gets left out is joy, and gratitude, worship, and life. What gets left out is everything that matters in a life worth living."¹

God wanted the Israelites to not just survive, but live. Live a full life as the people of God. While the stubborn Israelites didn't easily change, in the wilderness, God gradually and patiently remolded a bunch of former slaves into the people of God by showing and showering God's abundant grace. God invited the Israelites into faith in God and life abundant.

With faith in God, let us move toward the promised land

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/through-the-wilderness/seventeenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/seventeenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

The fundamental question that Exodus 17 presents is “do you want to survive, or do you want to live?” As we feel that we are standing in the ‘in-between’ place, we can easily slip into survival mode. But what we need is faith in God. With trust in God’s providence, we take a step forward toward the promised land. That’s the only way to escape from the hamster wheel!

So I want you to think about “where God is calling our church to go? Don’t think of utility bills we need to pay. Don’t worry about if our church has enough human resources to achieve our goals. But think of “what is God’s calling for our Asbury UMC?” and “where does God want us to be?” Once we know the promised land we seek, we can move forward, instead of “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” I believe... I believe God will guide our journey of transformation as God is with us. Even in this unusual time of the “in-between,” God is with us. Let us be grateful and trust in God. Boldly stepping forward in our mission for our church, our community, our nation and our world. Amen.