

It's time to shift our thinking

Exodus 16: 2-15; Matthew 20: 1-16

I entitled the sermon today 'It's time to shift our thinking'. What happens when things shift and it feels like we have lost what we had? What happens when our expectations are not met? I think there're several things that can happen in this case. Number one we can grumble and complain, number two we can blame the leader of the organization or the country or the movement, number three we can look back at the past and remember what we think are facts when in fact our memory and imagination unwittingly pass fiction off as truth.

Now after reading the story of Exodus this week the saying the grass is always greener on the other side came to mind. Why is that? I have suggested over the past few weeks that we are living in a liminal time, a time in the in between. Covid has thrust us into this liminal space where we can't go back to the way it was and we can't move forward yet because we don't know what the future holds. We lack certainty. We had great conversation this week about what will Christmas Eve look like we all realized we have no idea. We're going to have to wait. Now like the Israelites we have left the past behind and as we heard today in there complaining they have not gone as willingly as it seems. They had been given promises about what lies ahead the promised land, a land of milk and honey where they would have everything they could ever possibly want and this land would be theirs they would be free and liberated and no longer in slavery. I'm sure that they went to Moses and Aaron and after a time started to say, hey you know what we didn't really sign up for this. You're not kind of giving us the promises that we expected. How long are we going to have to live on this road in the in between? Now the story doesn't tell us how long they were on this journey before they started to complain. Perhaps it was a day, a week, maybe more, but we hear the cries from these people at this moment saying, 'why are you trying to kill us? We're starving. At least in Egypt we had a home, we had food, we had water.' It's probably like a road trip if any of you have kids and went on a long driving road trip and the kids were like are we there yet, how much longer is this going to take, when do I get food, I have to pee. There's always lots of issues. So just imagine what it would have been like for the Israelites to have left Egypt, left everything they knew behind, only to end up wandering aimlessly in this desert for days, weeks, months which turned into years. So what are Moses and Aaron to do in this moment? We're going to come back to that question.

The Bible is full of stories of people living in liminal times. It starts with Adam and Eve in the garden when suddenly they are thrust out of that and are now free to live their life on earth, but

with that comes some challenges. Then there was Noah and the Ark suddenly they were thrust onto the ship and they were left in the arc for a time not knowing what would come next. Then there's Ruth and Naomi, and Joseph thrown into the pit by his brothers and sold into slavery only to come back later, or Jesus in the deserts after he had been baptized. All of these are liminal times; stories about people living in a liminal space. The thread that connects all these stories is the fact that God is at work in those liminal spaces. A liminal space is a thin space, often where a lot of things and barriers are stripped away, allowing God to be seen more clearly, heard more readily, felt more deeply and experienced in ways we would never have experienced before. With that in mind let's go back to the question; what are Moses and Aaron to do in this moment as they listen to the Israelites complain? It's clear that the people are blaming them for what is happening. Aaron and Moses asked the people though in that moment to direct their anger not at them, but to God. During this whole exchange God is present, God is listening, and God says, 'I have heard your cries and I will provide for you. I will give you manna and quail.' Tell the people that I will provide for them and feed them. Now the Israelites who were in the moment of crankiness and complaining and grumpiness don't recognize what God is up to. They do not feel or see the presence of God. But why? Because they're human. We too are human, and we often fail to recognize God's work when we are suffering and in pain. Sometimes it's because we are blinded by our own ego or because our expectations are not being met.

So, let's turn to the parable that Jesus told to the disciples about the landowner and the vineyard. the workers make an assumption in this parable and that is what's making them so upset the workers who worked all day expected an assumed that they would be paid more for their work than the workers who showed up in the last hour to work. They assumed that they would be paid fairly, that things would be right and just. We need to remember not to take parables too literally that was never the intention. Parables are a teaching tool and in this case Jesus the teacher is speaking about God's generosity not fair wages. During my readings in preparation for today I heard a saying that I had not heard before, but I think it's great it says, 'assumptions are planned resentments.'¹ Whenever we assume something, we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse anger and resentment. It's clear that the Israelites assumed that once they got out of Egypt, life would be easier because they were no longer in slavery. They would be free they would finally have everything they ever wanted and needed. But what they didn't bank on was the fact that it would likely take 40 years to get to that point, to get to the promised land. In fact the generation that lived through slavery would probably never see the promised land, but their sacrifice and their commitment to God, their choice to follow Moses would change the lives of generations to come and what they were failing to recognize while on this journey is that God will provide for them always. They were given daily breads, they were provided with leaders who would guide them, encourage them, and stick with them and they had each other. In the parable that Jesus told the teaching is about God's generosity, God doesn't look down at us and

¹ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 94

say I think you deserve more, and you deserve less that's not how God works. God's generosity knows no bounds, but the fact that the people are being paid the same amount for not the same work goes against and violates our sense of what is right and wrong.

So think about it, at no time in this Exodus story did God say to the people complaining, 'Would you shut up already? Stop your grumbling. I'm helping you out.' Instead God listened. And what do we hear? We hear that God is willing to listen, that God is still going to provide for the people and act out of compassion. God can handle our complaints. God can hear and listen to our cries and laments. God hears Israelites cry out of sadness, out of grief and out of fear. God hears our cries as well. In this time of Covid. In this time where we are asking for systemic change, for justice. And in these moments God shows us compassion and will provide us with what we need to get to where God wants us to go. It's in these thin spaces this liminal time when major change is called for that we need to figure out what to do. God like I said has heard our cries for justice and we too have heard the cries that it's time to address the injustice that exists in our systems and institutions. What we need to assure ourselves and ensures that we don't just jump from one system and replace it with another. We need to resist the urge to rush through a liminal space to a solution. Instead as faithful followers of Christ we need to step into this liminal space and wait.

Reverend Susan Beaumont talks about God's waiting room. If you think about it, we go to a doctor's office because we're seeking help, but when we go, we end up in the waiting room and sometimes way longer than we want. I've heard the struggles recently about how much patience you need when going in for Covid tests and other surgeries. It's not a fast thing and sometimes our first stop at the doctor's office isn't enough we have to go back several times. We need to take full advantage of these liminal spaces because it's in those spaces that God is truly at work. Now Susan Beaumont suggests that there are three spiritual shifts that we need to make to be able to stay and take advantage of this liminal time. We need to move from knowing to unknowing, we need to move from advocating to attending, and we need to move from striving to surrender. Over the next several weeks we'll explore each of these in more detail but for now here is an overview. When moving from knowing to unknowing we need to learn to observe. We need to recognize where God is at work right now. We need to seek communion with God, and we must relinquish our need for control and our need for certainty about what we know. Right now, we need to be comfortable with the fact that we don't know the future. We do not know when we can do all the things we love to do again and instead we need to engage in the practice of wondering. Ask questions and really take notice of what is happening around you. Move from knowing to unknowing. And when we're talking about moving from advocating to attending; advocacy is a set of actions that targeted a support to a particular outcome or policy. Advocating does not serve us well in a time of liminal space because it assumes certainty, about direction and clarity about the outcome. Instead we need to attend, we need to pay attention. The quality of our attention shapes our steps and our choices. When it comes to racism, we have heard that it's time to step aside. We need to listen deeply and see more clearly than we ever have before. The role of the church and specifically the United church, we have spent a lot of time advocating; we need

to shift and move to attending. Our understanding of how we do social justice is being called to change and I don't have the answers of what this will look like and it's okay. And then we need to move from striving to surrender. Striving is vested in the ego self of an organization that is founded on the desire to be successful or feel competent. But to surrender is to accept the past for what it was, embrace the present reality and yield to the mystery of the future and the mystery of God in that future. We need to yield to what will emerge organically. So, don't start painting targets around things.²

All of this is going to feel foreign and uncomfortable so feel free to lift your concerns to God in these times. Cry out in anger it's okay. Share your grief of what has been lost and then come to God's waiting room. Open yourselves up to what God is offering us in this time. Try to let go of your resistance and instead embrace the practice of Sabbath. Sabbath calls us to pause, to reflect to discern, to pray and draw ourselves near to God. Notice where God is at work. And if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open to that we will be transformed, the church the role of the church can be transformed and then our world too can be transformed so that all people have a place, are provided for. A place of respect compassion and love. That is what God is calling us too but don't be afraid as we hear in the Bible repeatedly. Don't be afraid God goes before us always. All we need to do is follow listen and right now, wait. Hardest thing to do, but that's what we're called to and for this we give God thanks. Amen.

² Rev. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)