Sunday, August 25, 1985
LOOKING BACKWARD: A HELP OR HINDRANCE?
Exodus 16:1-3; Luke 9:57-62

They hadn't been out of Egypt, and free from slavery, very long before the people of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, began to complain. The Book of Exodus in the Old Testament puts it this way— "And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness." They had been gone from Egypt for six weeks. Moses discovered to his surprise that getting the people out of Egypt was an easy matter compared with getting Egypt out of the people.

They "murmured" against Moses and Aaron! They griped, they muttered, they complained. They had lived under the lash of slavery, but now murmured because bread was scarce. As they looked back from the wilderness, slavery didn't seem so bad after all. Freedom has its risks, its uncertainties, while being slaves, they were at least given bread and water. There's a certain security in slavery — any kind of slavery — and so they looked backward and complained, not about slavery, but about freedom.

Let's look first at their murmuring and ours, and then at their fears of freedom and ours, for they are connected to each other.
Murmurers, complainers are still with us, and it's a disease that quickly spreads. If there is one chronic complainer in a group, soon it infects everyone. Someone wrote— "There's one thing I'm certain of: misery loves company. Not only does it love it! It demands it! The miserable want you to be miserable too!"

A complainer is never satisfied. "The food is terrible, and such small portions." There are some people who are impossible to please. One ill-tempered complaining husband was sullen and silent at the breakfast table. "How do you want your eggs cooked?" asked his wife gently. "One fried and one scrambled," he answered gruffly. When she placed the eggs before him, he was furious. "What's wrong?" asked his wife. "You fried the wrong egg!" he snapped.

Most complainers are backward lookers, and their kind of looking backward keeps them from appreciating the present and from going forward. Everything was always better back then — at least that's what they say. The present is never good, and they are even more afraid of the future. Of course, the past, when they lived in it, was never good either.
For the complainer, there's too much rain, then not enough. The weather is either too hot or too cold. Chronic complaining accomplishes nothing except to make more people miserable.

Our tendency to look backward and then complain about the present is part of what the Christian faith describes as original sin. C.S. Lewis says somewhere that we come into this world with "bent spirits," at odds with the very structure of reality as it is given to us.

The complainer seems always to be at odds with life as it is given. I have referred before to Karen Horney's famous distinction between a psychotic and a neurotic. "A psychotic," she said, "is a person who says: 'Two plus two is five;' that is, they are completely out of touch with reality. A neurotic, however, is a person who says: 'Two plus two is four, but I do not like it!'" There is something about the way life is put together that never seems to suit them. They always have something to complain about. They are always afraid.

“What a beautiful day it is,” you say to such a person, and he replies, “But I hear it’s going to rain tomorrow.” Complainers don’t like the present, but they dislike change even more.

There are two givens at this point which complainers always forget. The first is the fact that change is a fundamental characteristic of life as we experience it hour by hour and day by day. Nothing remains exactly the same forever. Our bodies, for example, are continually undergoing real, if largely imperceptible, alterations. Change is the consistent element of existence as we know it.

The other given in this area is that change by its very nature involves loss and gain. Think about it for a moment. For something to qualify for the noun “change,” there must be an experience of both loss and gain. This means that you get something you did not have and give up something that you did have. If both of these dimensions are not present, then the experience in question is not a genuine change.

Thus the complainers, the murmurers, are often those who are waging a life-long war against the process of change; they are those who never come to terms with this thing that happens to our bodies, our institutions, our relationships, to everything.
They want to believe that if you leave things alone, you leave them as they are with no change. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone, you leave it to a torrent of change. If you leave a white post alone, it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white, you must always be painting it again.

So looking back and longing for the past can come in large part from our fear of change and it can lead to murmuring, to complaining, and all that does is to make things worse. As Jesus said in one place, “No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Secondly, like the Israelites, our murmuring may be a cover for our fear of freedom. There is a part of all of us that is afraid to be free — for to be free is to give up a certain amount of security. Sometimes we ask in dismay how tyrant after tyrant could come to control so many people at so many points in history. The answer in part is that we human beings are often afraid to be free. Freedom always implies responsibility. So we all have our “Egypts,” even our slaveries, and our abusers that we find it difficult to leave behind because they represent to us security.

Ask yourself this morning— “What’Egypt’within my life do I find it hard to abandon? Why?” Perhaps your fear of freedom, and with it your fear of change, keeps you from looking forward with hope and at the same time causes you to romanticize the past. Israel’s time in slavery in Egypt was not nearly as good as they later imagined it to be. In the same way, some of your slaveries, and mine, aren’t nearly as good as we imagine them to be, but they give us a feeling of security.

Your “Egypt” may be a place where you once lived, but since have left, but you cannot let it go. Or it may be where you now live and know you should move on, but cannot because of your fear of losing your security. Your “Egypt” may be a job you once held, or a job you now hold and should let go, but are afraid.

Your “Egypt” can be anything that is difficult for you to let go to leave behind, even your grudges or your hates, or your unwillingness to forgive. Whatever your “Egypt” is, if it causes

you to continually look backward and therefore be a hindrance, let it go. That kind of backward-looking is never a help.

Remember too that when you leave your “Egypt” behind, you may experience a sense of loss, even if that “Egypt” was an unpleasant experience. Like the people of Israel, to get to the Promised Land you have to pass through the wilderness. Here in the wilderness, they experienced the grief of loss. And they had to pass through that grief and deal with it before they could enter the Promised Land.

The wilderness is something you cannot run from. You need to go through the wilderness — there is no way around it. There is always a dimension of loss in a significant change experience — sometimes so overwhelming that you do not think you can stand it. But if you run from this aspect of it — that is, try to avoid or evade the pain — you wind up missing the other aspect of change, namely, the gain that always is an inherent part of it too. There is no gain without pain.

Frederick Buechner tells of having had a professor in college whose wife died unexpectedly at seven o’clock one evening. The next morning at eight o’clock sharp, that professor appeared in the classroom and gave his lecture as if nothing had happened. In fact, he never broke stride from that day forward as far as anybody knew. An enormous change had occurred in this man’s life, but he responded by stonewalling the whole thing, and as a result, never got over it.

John Claypool, a minister that I appreciate very much for his writing, said that he was honestly tempted to respond to his own worst experience of change in the way that this professor responded to his wife’s death.
When Claypool’s ten-year-old daughter died of leukemia, there were some people who wanted him to jump right back in the pulpit and say that it was really not so bad after all. Their fears and desires not to have to struggle called for this sort of response. But he did not choose to do it that way. Their daughter, Laura Lue, died on Saturday night and he did not show up the next morning to preach as if nothing had happened. That might have been easier for some people, but something deep within him said it would not be better. Rather, he dared to feel all there was to feel at that moment in terms of loss, and in all honesty, it was hell.
He said that to live into all the feelings of what he had had and now what he had lost, to look in the face the fact that interaction with that person in history was now over, it literally broke his heart. He did not try to preach for six weeks.

By experiencing the loss, by not trying to run from it, he got in touch with the other side of change. He said that he learned that God can be counted on in the worst and most terrible of times. In his own words, “When I got to the place that ahead of time I thought I could not stand, behold, strength I had never known before was there, not a moment too soon or a moment too late, and what a consolation that is in relation to future possibilities. If God was for me in that kind of trauma — and God surely was — what do I have to fear in the great not yet? Who or what can be against me with that kind of ally?”

And then he said, “I learned that there were always options on the other side of trauma. They may not be what you most want or would have chosen, but as long as you find yourself breathing, that means that God still has a future for you — there are still things that can be done with what is left.”

“I remember vividly sitting in a restaurant some six weeks after Laura Lue died with my wife and son. I looked at the empty chair at the table and thought my heart would break. She was

not — would never be — there again, and for a moment there did not seem anything left to live for. And then I looked at my son and said to myself, 'But wait! There he is, representative of all that is left. To give up would be to say to him: Laura Lue was all that mattered, and that is not true!'"
It was in the wilderness that Claypool discovered a deeper trust in God than he had ever known before.
So too for the Israelites with Moses as their leader. In the wilderness, after they stopped murmuring and complaining — once they stopped longing for Egypt — they found a deeper experience of God than they had ever known before.

Furthermore, this led them to discover that there can be a kind of looking back which is a help and not a hindrance. There is a kind of looking back from which we can draw strength.

The people of Israel could look back and see that God had led them out of slavery and that God was with them in the wilderness. In fact, in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, to remember in this sense has a central place, and all remembering is a form of looking back. There are memories that nourish us and memories that can destroy us.

Good looking back offers good guidance and hope. We've all had the experience that in times of distress, failure, and depression, it is the good memories which give us new confidence and hope.

That's what the prophets frequently did for Israel — they reminded the people how God had led them out of slavery; how God had fed them in the wilderness. This memory also was to guide them in their treatment of others— "Do not mistreat strangers, remember that once you were a stranger." By reminding the people of the misery of slavery and the liberating love of God, the prophets of Israel motivated them to move forward, and challenged them to honor their memory by their behavior.
There is one kind of looking back, represented by the complaints of the people of Israel, which holds us back and makes us fear the future. But there is another kind of looking back which moves us forward with hope. It is this kind of looking back that we, as Christians, can practice. We remember that God has been with us in the past, and therefore we are certain that God is with us in the present and in the future.

So our Christian faith reminds us that our memories, our looking back, can give us guidance. They can be a blueprint for the present and the future. They can help us to move forward and be faithful to the vision which led us out of slavery, and obedient to the call which says that the Promised Land is still ahead of us. Amen.