

<Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Matthew 21:23-32>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Our daughter turned eight this past Thursday, and as I've been reflecting on this journey of parenthood over the last almost-decade, I've realized that I've become something of an arm-chair expert on Disney movies. I may not be able to tell you anything intelligent about Emmy-nominated movies or actors, but I can discuss at length the arcs of character development in the *Toy Story* franchise, or talk about the nuances of family systems theory in *Moana* or the impact of misguided self-understanding in the *Frozen* movies, or even the transmission and healing of generational trauma in *Encanto*. Let me know if you need me for your pub trivia team...

This pseudo-expertise has also strengthened my ability to recognize patterns in story-telling, and while this has primarily been through the medium of children's movies, it is a skill which is beneficial when critically looking at just about any story. For instance, I can tell you that the people of Israel, newly-removed from Egypt and their life of forced servitude, are now stuck in a repeating pattern.

For any of us who have grown up hearing these stories, this is not news to us, but if this is your first time tuning in, allow me to expand.

As we read a few weeks ago, Moses has been sent to the people of Israel in order to bring them out of servitude in Egypt, and lead them through the wilderness to the new place where God will settle them, and build the covenant relationship with them. The first part of that goes well enough; ultimately, Moses leads the people out of Egypt. But then we get into the second part of this process, and here's where we begin to see the people fall into this repeating pattern. We saw it in earlier readings, and in truth we'll see it again from readings in the coming weeks. But the pattern looks like this: the people become uneasy about some dynamic in this journey and begin to mutiny, Moses turns to God for direction and is given a response, Moses does this action for the people, easing their anxiety and pointing their attention back to God, and then the people journey on. Wash, rinse, repeat.

And right now, in our reading this morning, the people are at the beginning stage of that process: they are uneasy about where they will find water, and are fearful that they will die in the wilderness. They are beginning to grumble and mutiny, proclaiming that it would have been better for them to die in Egypt than in the wilderness because at least in Egypt - even though they were slaves and had no options or hope before them - at least in Egypt they had food and water. They had familiarity. Here, in the wilderness, everything is unpredictable, unestablished, and unfamiliar.

And therein lies the crux: the people are worried about water. Earlier they were worried about food. And water. And their future. But those, while very real issues, are also surface-level, because what's really going on is that the people are anxious and don't

know how to address their anxiety. How to manage it. How to faithfully and resiliently work their way through it. They are anxious, and they are letting their anxiety drive and determine them, letting it run away with them.

How many of us have ever been anxious, and felt like we didn't know what to do next? How to respond? How to manage our anxiety rather than allowing it to manage us? The answer is: all of us. We have all been in that situation at one time or another. And yet again, we are not the first.

The Pharisees have also been stuck in their own narrative pattern. Similar to the people of Israel in the wilderness, they are anxious, and their anxiety is driving them to try and manage a situation they view as a potential threat, without stopping to ask - honestly - if there might not be something more at work in their lives and in the world around them. And again, we have seen this before, both in the stories of the Pharisees and in our own lives.

In this specific case, the Pharisees witnessed Jesus acting with authority in the Temple complex; an authority they did not grant him, which would have been their responsibility as those in charge of the Temple practices and policies. Their anxiety is not mingled so much with fear for physical survival as it is with uncertainty of their livelihood and potential threat to their belief-system. And that can be even more impactful in terms of how they respond, and the lengths to which they are willing to go in order to ease their anxiety.

Now, if these stories were Disney movies, our anxious characters might well be drawn as the clear-cut villains out to foil and undermine our heroes' efforts. But these stories are not Disney, and while they are stories to us, they reflect real people who lived and moved through their days as best they could. Just as we do in our lives today.

And our stories from Scripture do two things in our lives of faith: they help us to more clearly see & describe the questions and dilemmas we face in our own lives, and then they give us an example to help us better determine our next faithful action or response. It can be easy to look at these stories, our Scripture readings, and be critical of certain people or characters in the story, but in reality, we are called upon to remember that they are human, just as we are, facing uncertain futures, just as we do. Our role is not to be critical of them, but to recognize how much we have in common and then learn from their example so that we might live more faithfully ourselves.

What do we do with anxiety, whether individual or organizational? How do we respond, not react, to anxiety in our own lives? This is really the question at the heart of our Scripture readings this morning.

The misguided reactions in our two stories from Scripture are based in sabotage - the work of inhibiting or undoing the forward, faithful progress toward the ultimate goal. In the case of the people of Israel, the goal is to journey toward the Promised Land and, in the process, journey closer to God spiritually, strengthening the Divine relationship.

While rightly concerned with their need for water, their reaction to give up and return to Egypt, or to declaim Moses and God in the process, is a systemic reaction of indirect sabotage.

In the case of the Pharisees, faced with the realization of an authority outside of and beyond them, the work of sabotage is bit more direct and evident: the questioning of Jesus and attempting to trap, discredit, and undo his teachings.

When faced with unmanaged anxiety, the reaction is to sabotage the effort, even when the effort is clearly leading toward a desired and agreed upon goal. Unmanaged anxiety can inhibit and undo progress; that is the reaction. But what is the response, and more than that, what is the faithful response?

Or, put more succinctly and directly, what does God want us to do?

Ultimately, God wants us to trust the source, to trust that God is, in fact, leading us and will see to our needs, and that our primary role is to be guided in this direction. God wants us to trust God, especially when we feel anxious or uncertain.

When Moses brings the complaint of the people to God, God gives direction (and a miracle) but also instructs that Moses bring the elders that they, too, might see and learn, and bear witness to the others. When the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus, he turns the question around on them and then offers an example that they can name and, if they are willing, incorporate into their own lives of faith and leadership. It is never *just* an answer of, “trust God;” there is also an example of *what* that looks like lived out.

When facing anxiety and uncertainty, our initial reaction is to protect the status quo and remain in, or return to the familiar, even if the familiar was never going to get us to our ultimate goal. This tension creates a false binary, which often feels untenable: stay where we are (or even go back to where we were), or push on ahead regardless of the cost. But in the relationship, we have with God, as members of the communion of God’s kingdom, there is a third option, a new response, to which we are called: in trusting the source of life and the author of our lives, we find that the cause of our anxiety is met and the way forward becomes more evident.

There is much in our world that will elicit anxiety, and if we lived in a Disney movie there would be a catchy tune about it, perhaps written by the likes of Lin Manuel-Miranda. There would also be a clear-cut goal to solve the problem. But life is not a kids movie, and the stories of our lives are more nuanced, and more complex than that. As a people of faith, however, we have an answer to help guide us in the right direction, and that is to remember who God is and who we are as God’s people, and then to let God guide us and strengthen us as we move along in life. The path may not always be clear, but the guide is one who can see us to the goal. And in this, we trust, and are faithful. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*