

Sermon for LUC on September 21, 2008
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Here I AM (Grumbling in the Wilderness)

I suppose that after a really bad week, when everything seems to go wrong, when everything you touch seems to explode in the wrong way, when you really start to wonder if you have any wits at all about you (such as the week I've just had!), it would be easy to grumble.

Sometimes, it seems that in every area of your life, there's a little tornado spinning, and it's all you can do to keep the little tornadoes at bay, and to keep them from gathering you up in their storm and sweeping you out of control. It's like juggling, but instead of juggling balls or oranges, as most people do, it's more like juggling torches of fire.

(which I have seen, and which looks impossibly dangerous)

I have to say that it's far easier to grumble about what life throws our way, than to find the opposite: moments of gratitude and peace. I'm not good at it, and so I can't expect you folks to be good at it.

For me, though, the last straw this week was getting a speeding ticket on Eglinton. I drive across Eglinton both ways a couple of times each day. The cops are there every day in one position or another. I KNOW to go slow. Still, I got caught.

Grumble grumble grumble.

Turns out I had just left the office quickly at noon to go to the bank, and I had turned around to go back because I had forgotten to bring my wallet. Of course, I got caught without my wallet. And let me tell you, when your name is John Smith, being lost without your wallet is not always funny.

I have four tickets from Thursday, totalling 325 dollars.

I know that most of you are good-natured folks. You would simply say: Well, there are a lot of people worse off. It could be a lot worse. True. But doesn't it sometimes feel like the world is against you, despite all your good efforts???

On a day like Thursday, I could very easily understand the plight of the band of weary travellers who had landed in the desert, following Moses, a leader without a plan, only a vision, and no map, nor any idea how to get to the promised land.

The water they found along the way was brackish, unclean. The food they had packed had run out. The desert is a cruel and unforgiving landscape. And so, after a month of this, close to starvation, it seems quite right that the people would rise up and complain.

We'd rather be in Egypt!

We'd rather be slaves to Pharaoh!

We'd rather not starve in the desert; at least back home we had something to eat.

The Bible text says they murmured against God, and took it out on Moses.

That's important: they were grumpy and they grumbled at Moses, but mostly they were mad at God.

Did you know that we are each programmed with a genetic imprint for happiness? Researchers at the University of Dallas Texas have studied happiness and gratitude for the last 10 years, and have come up with some stunning insights.

It seems that all of us have an in-bred SET point, like the fulcrum point of a scale, a balance point for happiness, to which we return again and again, even when we get thrown off balance.

According to Bob Emmons, now pre-eminent world famous researcher on Thanksgiving, 50% of our happiness level comes from a genetic predisposition. In other words, whether we are a cup-half-empty or a cup-half-full type of person, depends pretty much on our genes.

The other 40 percent is situational and environmental. This means that 40 percent of the time, your mood is influenced by what happens to you, either on a daily basis, or over a period of time.

Can you imagine what the last 10 percent is?

That's right: it's what you choose to do about it.

Emmons tested two disparate groups, one, a group of lottery winners, and two, a group of people who had neuromuscular disorders and suffered a great deal of pain. In both cases, the study participants, over a period of time, returned to their SET point of happiness. However, those who chose to practise gratitude (this was part of the study and it was controlled scientifically, for the most part), increased their happiness levels by up to %25 more.

The upshot of this research is that the portion of our happiness that we control, by our response to what happens to us in our life, has a long and lasting effect on our overall happiness level.

And people who raise this level typically suffer fewer colds and flu, sleep better, have longer marriages and healthier relationships, have more energy and determination, less depression and less stress, etc. I'll tell you more about this on Thanksgiving Sunday.

But I raise it today because it is a salient part of the old tales of God's people wandering around lost in the desert. They were grumpy. They grumbled against God. They murmured curses against God under their breath. They distrusted their leaders, and they threatened to abandon ship.

And these were the people God loved!

These were the people whom God rescued from the slave pits of Egypt!

These were the people who believed they were chosen by God to be a light to all nations. You might expect them to be a bit more grateful! No wonder God left them in the wilderness for such a long time. 40 years! A whole generation, maybe even two, passed by before there was a pathway opened toward the promised land.

Do you ever feel stuck in a rut?

Do you ever wonder if there is anything more than our mundane Monday to Friday existence?

Do you ever think that maybe there is no plan after all, and that we humans are just little blips on the evolutionary trail, destined to be lost forever?

Do you ever wonder how it is that such a fortunate group of people, such as we are in this culture and this place in the world we share in 2008, could be so unhappy?

The Exodus story is a strong metaphor for us today. We are a people in search of something which we cannot name, and which we cannot find.

We are a culture that seems to be slipping away from its moorings each day, example: we accept the shootings and gang violence that occur each day in our city.

We are lost now. We are wandering around in a forest, or a desert, or through rough seas, without an anchor.

We are wandering the hallways of cancer wards, or divorce court hallways, or the corridors of power and influence in the big corporations of the world.

And we are lost.

We come home from work feeling beaten up, stressed out, not sure whether we can take another day.

The phone keeps ringing and it's someone else wanting more of your hard-earned money.

You watch the news and it doesn't register: this is who we are. This is where we are now.

In the immortal words of Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, we're not in Kansas anymore.

This past spring I had the incredible honour of being able to ride my bike in the Ride to Conquer Cancer. 200 km over two days, a journey from Toronto to Niagara Falls, through the winding hills of Halton region, and climbing up the Hamilton mountain at the end of the first day. I admit I wanted to quit. I was tired, grumpy and I was with a group of people on that first day, who were crying in pain because they couldn't face another long uphill battle. It was hard to stay focussed. When it started raining, I remember thinking: I'm not going to make it!

But 2 things happened.

One, my daughter Laura called me on my cell phone and told me how proud she was that I was doing this ride, and reminded of the reasons, personal to our family, that I really wanted to do this journey.

And secondly, a group of riders passed me who had yellow flags attached to the back of their bikes. The people who had those flags were cancer survivors, people who had walked the wilderness trail of cancer treatment, the sickness, the pain, the sense of loss and hopelessness that overtakes you sometimes, and had come out on the other side. Not stronger, maybe, but surviving. The thing is: they CHOSE to survive. They CHOSE the 10% solution, according to the gratefulness chart. And this choosing gave them meaning and hope and courage and strength, enough to take on the bike ride.

And just seeing those folks ride by made me realize something that I feel is really profound: we are all survivors. Despite what the world throws at us, despite the accidents, the illnesses, the bad management, the stock market crashes, the arguments, squabbles, the disillusionment and stresses of our days and our nights, we are making it through. We may be scarred, scorched or scandalized by life, but we are here.

We are here.

Last week I asked you to imagine the north and south points on a compass, being representative of the front end and back end of God's support through the wilderness journey, the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud.

Today, think about the east and west ends of the compass, as time. In the east we are born, as the sun rises in the east. In the west, we will die, as the sun sets in the west.

In between those events, neither of which we will consciously remember, we live.

Our life is ALL wilderness wandering if you think about it. None of us knows what tomorrow holds. None of us can predict the future given the way our lives have gone in the past. The same is true for our church, our congregation. We have a life, we have a journey, we have a place to inhabit.

That place is here and now. It may not seem like a lot, but I think it is HUGE.

What the Exodus story reminds me over and over again, is something that Process theologians (and I'll be sharing a lot of process theology with you this fall) tell us over and over again:

That God, our God, is ALWAYS creative and responsive to our need.

AND, over time, God changes God's response to us and the need arises.

God knows we are hungry and thirsty, tired and grumpy, prone to complain.

God knows that.

And God provides for us a tiny little speck of hope (called manna) each day, whether we can see it on the ground in front of us or not. Just because we can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there.

God is not just with us as a travel companion. We are discovering God everywhere on this journey.

The "kingdom of heaven" that Jesus talked about, was never really a place or even a time. He said it was coming, and that it was already here. Jesus lived there because he had a relationship with God that was deeper than dependency.

Jesus knew that his soul and God's heart, were one and the same.

And that the kingdom is not so much found, as it is BORN in our hearts. The kingdom, is the east and west axis of the compass of our lives. We are born in it, and it is born in us. We are here, and God is here now. In our hearts, in our souls. Living.

I think the problem for our time is that we do not live at the level of the soul. We have forgotten how to live there. We have forgotten how to access that deep part of ourselves that resonates with our Creator. We are not keeping faith with the one who keeps faith with us. We are not grateful for our souls; we are not grateful for this very moment, so full and ripe with possibility.

We are simply out of practice. We have trained ourselves to see the bad, and to expect only the best, and we are disappointed when something or someone fails to meet those expectations. When we set our expectations too high, no one can attain them. Not even God.

In our lives, in our work, in our families, in our church, God is creative and responsive. God knows what we need and will put it in front of us.

God will nourish us in the middle of whatever wilderness in which we find ourselves, and God will feed us enough and give us enough SOUL to imagine that we have a great future ahead of us.

The Great I AM knows who I am.

The great I AM is here inside me, and all around me, loving, leading me.

And when I pause to imagine this, at the level of the soul,, I find there no complaints, no grumbles, no lamentations or diatribes, just peace. And that is enough for today.