

"We Want to Go Back To Egypt!"  
Exodus 16:1-36  
August 1, 2021  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

**So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt**

Written by Melody Green & Keith Green  
(Performed by Keith Green)

So you wanna go back to Egypt  
Where it's warm and secure  
Are sorry you bought the one way ticket  
When you thought you were sure  
You wanted to live in the land of promise  
But now it's getting so hard  
Are you sorry you're out here in the desert  
Instead of your own back yard

Eating leaks and onions by the Nile  
Ooh what breath for dining out in style  
Ooh, my life's on the skids  
Give me the pyramids

Well there's nothing to do but travel  
And we sure travel a lot  
'Cause it's hard to keep your feet from moving  
When the sand gets so hot

And in the morning it's manna hotcakes  
We snack on manna all day  
And we sure had a winner last night for dinner  
Flaming manna souffle

Well, we once complained for something new to munch  
The ground opened up and had some of us for lunch  
Ooh, such fire and smoke  
Can't God even take a joke? Huh? NO!

So you wanna to back to Egypt  
Where your friends wait for you  
You can throw a big party and tell the whole gang

that what they said was all true  
And this Moses acts like a big shot  
Who does he think he is?  
Well it's true that God works lots of miracles  
But Moses thinks they're all his

Well I'm having so much trouble even now  
Why'd he get so mad about that c-c-c-cow (that golden calf)  
Moses seems rather idle  
He just sits around, he just sits around and writes the Bible!

Oh, Moses, put down your pen!  
What? Oh no, manna again?

Oh, manna waffles...  
Manna burgers  
Manna bagels  
Filet of manna  
Manna cotti?  
BaManna bread!

That explains it pretty well, don't you think? According to scripture, the Hebrew people lived as slaves in the land of Egypt for over 400 years. They were oppressed by the pharaoh who forced them into the hard labor of building cities and the pyramids, among other things.

We read in chapter one of the book of Exodus, *"The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them."*

At the end of chapter two we begin to see a glimmer of hope, *"After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."*

Soon enough God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush while he is watching his father-in-law's sheep. God says, *"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."*

I am sure Moses thought, "Well, that's great news but why are you telling me?" And then God says, *"So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."*

Moses thought that was a terrible idea and tried to talk God out of it. But God wants who God wants and before long Moses was in Egypt warning pharaoh about the dangers of holding on to the Israelite people. After ten horrendous plagues, each one worse than the last, pharaoh finally kicked the Israelites out of the country. Over 600,000 men, women, and children along with some who weren't Israelites, and many thousands of animals left in a hurry.

God led them on a roundabout way so they wouldn't be attacked by the Philistines and want to return to Egypt. Before long pharaoh changed his mind about letting them go and sent his troops after them. The army caught up with the former slaves on the shores of the Red Sea and the people were terrified. They cried out against Moses, "Weren't there enough graves to bury us in Egypt? Is that why you brought us out into the wilderness to die? Didn't we say to you, 'leave us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?'" They had a bad case of "selective memory."

God gave Moses the power to part the waters of the sea and the Israelites passed through on the dry land to safety. When the Egyptian army tried to follow them, they were swallowed up by the waves. The Israelites traveled three days into the wilderness and found themselves at Marah where the water was undrinkable. They were thirsty and cried out to Moses, "We will die of thirst! Give us something to drink!" God showed Moses a piece of wood and Moses threw it in the water and the water became pure and sweet.

Then God made them a promise, "If you do what I say and obey my rules then you will be safe and healthy." They traveled on and came to an oasis called Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees ripe with delicious dates.

After a while they traveled on from Elim and came to the wilderness of Sin (short for Sinai). So here they are, this great multitude of people following Moses and his brother, Aaron, and sister, Miriam. It has been six weeks since they left their life of enslavement in Egypt. And reality begins to set in.

When they left Egypt, I am sure they thought they would immediately be led into their fabulous new homeland. But instead of paradise they get the desert. From deliverance at the sea, they end up in the godforsaken wilderness. To their eyes it looks as though they were led out of one dire situation directly into another. At this point they have no idea this will be a forty-year journey. If they had known that I am guessing there would have been a mad dash back to Egypt.

They have been on the road for a month and a half and now their food stores are beginning to run out. They started complaining. "We are so hungry! If only we had died in Egypt. At least there we had enough to eat. Why did you bring us the whole way out here to starve to death?" Faith in Moses and in God decrease as their hunger pangs increase. And what does God do? God feeds them. God promises Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven to meet their needs."

Deliverance comes to them in the middle of the wilderness. They aren't removed from this godforsaken place, they are cared for in the midst of it. God is faithful.

We often criticize these people and call them a bunch of whiners and complainers. Moses is leading them to freedom and all they can do is complain and demand to go back to where they came from. But really, can you blame them?

They don't know where they are going. They don't know very much about Moses or about God. They are just beginning their relationship with God as God's people. In his commentary on Exodus, Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim refers to this time in the life of the Hebrew people as their teenage years. And we know what a turbulent time that can be.

*Fretheim writes, "Although the people are often ungrateful and disloyal, the divine blessing and graciousness pervade the narrative. Israel's time in the wilderness is finally shaped by God's incredible patience and mercy and the divine will to stay with Israel in this time of their adolescence as the children of God. If God wants a mature child, the possibility of defiance must be risked.*

*God will not compromise in holding Israel to a high*

*standard- for the sake of the creation. And so God works through their feelings of abandonment and helplessness, their words of complaint and acts of rebelliousness, and their need for reassurance, protection, a new self-identity, and non-oppressive life structures.*

*God sticks by them through it all. God has made promises to this people, and God is a promise-keeper." (1)*

Think about what they are going through. They have never known a life outside of the oppression of enslavement in Egypt. They have no sense of their identity. They don't know what it means to be God's people. One day they are making bricks for pharaoh's latest building project and the next they are part of a mass migration to a place they have never heard of, led by a man who doesn't quite seem to know what he is doing. They are just beginning the process of becoming who they are supposed to be. It will be a rough and rocky road, but they will eventually arrive at the place God calls them to be.

God provides bread for them- every- single- day- of their journey. They are to gather what they need for each day. The only day they can gather more is the sixth day when they gather enough for that day and the next. It is a reminder to rest on the sabbath day- just as God did during creation.

Of course, some people don't follow directions and others try to hoard the miraculous bread. But those who stray from God's directions find the manna spoils and they are left with nothing. God tells Moses to collect about two quarts of the manna and save it for future generations as a reminder. It became something of a worship center, a visible symbol during their worship, reminding them of God's constant gracious care.

It is human nature to long for the past when the present gets difficult. The harder their life gets in the wilderness, the more nostalgic they become for their good, old life in Egypt. You would think they had been forced to leave a luxury resort instead of a life of horrific oppression and slavery.

We do the same thing. "Oh, the good old days," we say,

reminiscing about how much happier we were then; how much easier life was. I always ask, who were those days good for? Women? People of color? Immigrants? Children? Usually not.

We need to be clear that the Bible does not condemn complaining. The book of Psalms is filled with psalms of lament. God's prophets cried out to God all the time. When people in the Bible are complaining they are actually turning **to** God, not **away** from God. When they are upset or worried, they trust that the Almighty God will not ignore, dismiss, or punish them when they call out in fear, anger, suffering, and need.

God has brought them into the wilderness to build a congregation, a faith community characterized by integrity, honor, care, justice, and compassion. Maybe their journey is so long because that's how long it takes them to shed their identity as enslaved people. Maybe that's how long it takes them to realize and accept their new identity as people of freedom, people of God. When they cry out for bread and God gives them bread, they have

learned something important. God will hear them. God will respond. God will take care of their needs. Over time their memories of the food they ate in Egypt will be replaced by the taste of the food God provides for them.

The people Moses was leading had spent their entire lives under the oppressive rule of a tyrant. All they knew was the hoarding of the elite and the poverty of the enslaved. They knew firsthand the deadly competition to get more and keep it. All they knew was a society where human lives were abused and broken in order to fill the hunger of the one percenters.

God took them into the wilderness to teach them another way of living; to create another kind of community. Through this journey and God's daily provision of food they will learn to trust God and to share their resources with each other.

As our world travels through this wilderness called Covid, how are we reacting? Are we hoarding, complaining, turning against one another? Yes, we are.

Are we sharing what we have, showing compassion, sacrificing for others? Yes, we are.

The wilderness journey shows us our true selves. We are appalled by those who hoard toilet paper and refuse to wear a mask to protect others. We applaud first responders for putting themselves in danger to care for strangers. We are astonished both by crass selfishness and heroic compassion.

So, you wanna go back to Egypt? To the good old days before the pandemic? Who were those days good for, really? The only way to get out of this wilderness is to keep walking forward- together, trusting in each other and the grace of God. And maybe, just maybe, by the time we get to the promised land, post-pandemic, we will be the people we were meant to be all along.

May it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *EXODUS, Interpretation Series, Terrence E. Fretheim, John Knox Press. 1991. Pp. 172-173.*