

3rd Sunday of Lent A Corpus Christi 2011
Exodus 17:3-7

"Hindsight is 20/20." Or is it?

A teenager complains to his parents about the amount of homework and the difficulty of his high school classes, and his parent's reply, " You call that challenging? Why, in my day, we had to write our own textbooks, walk to school-uphill, both ways, study at night by the light of a single candle, and we made all A's. That's how it was in my day."

A young woman tells her mother that her after-school job is difficult and stressful, to which mother replies, "You call that work? Why, when I was your age I was working twelve hours a day in the summer, and eight hours a day during school days. I was paid 10 cents per week, and I thought that was generous, so I gave a nickel in the offering at church each week. We never complained about work when I was your age, we were all just so grateful to have a job. The harder the work, the better. That's how it was in my day."

A young adult laments the crime and lack of moral conscience in contemporary society, and an older adult overhearing the comment replies, "What's wrong with this young generation? Why in my day, there was no crime, no evil, no sin. Everyone went to church every week. We all loved everyone, looked after each other, and kept our world pure and innocent. Yes those were the good old days..."

Now, with all due respect, let me ask again, "Is hindsight really 20/20?" From what I hear of our memories, mine included, our hindsight could use some corrective lens glasses. The truth is that our memories tend to get idealized over time. We all have selective memory, not perfect recall. Just listen to the reflections of the empty-nest parents as they retell the stories of the days when the children were at home. You would think you were listening to the chronicles of a perfect family. But like the family picture albums, our memories become edited down to favorite events like birthdays, weddings, cute baby sounds, graduations, and most-memorable childhood moments. Gone are the memories of dirty diapers, screaming fights with teenagers over the nighttime curfew, and the sibling rivalries that bloodied noses and bruised hearts.

This selective memory is innocent enough, of course, unless a person is

trying to return to the past, thinking it was as ideal as their memory of it.

Such was the case in our Old Testament lesson of today's first reading. God had rescued the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt after 450 years of bondage. But after only a few months in the wilderness, on the way to the promised land, the hunger and thirst and tired muscles of the desert began to make some of the Israelites long for a return to Egypt. Can you imagine that?

We idealize the past when the present moment is unpleasant.

Israel suffered from the common malady called "what have you done for me lately." In just the previous chapter of Exodus they complained to Moses when they became hungry in the wilderness. Some of them even dared to say that they were better off in Egypt, where they recalled a life of sitting around pots of food each day. Talk about idealized memory! Had they forgotten the slavery and bondage of Egypt so quickly? Had they forgotten that Pharaoh has tried to kill them? Had they forgotten already the 450 years of prayer for deliverance from Egypt? And now they were barely two months after the miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea, and they were grumbling! But stomachs that grumble tend to make mouths grumble. It is still true today. Just ask the parents who are trying to calm the toddler who is hungry in church. Even a ten-minute homely seems endless when you are hungry, doesn't it? So what did God do for Israel in the previous chapter of Exodus? He brought them manna, a bread-like food, to sustain them each day during their wilderness journey.

But that was last chapter. In the present story from our Old Testament lesson, the children of Israel are not hungry anymore. They had been fed with manna that very morning. But now they are thirsty. And again they complain to Moses. They even suggest that Moses, and God, have led them to the wilderness in order to kill them from lack of water. Can you imagine that accusation, especially in the light of all God's ample provision and redemption so far? So God, with infinite patience, told Moses to take the same rod that he used to part the Red Sea—a not too subtle reminder to the children of Israel to sharpen their memory—and strike a rock to produce a spring of water to slake their thirst.

The rock burst forth with water, a quite unnatural source for a life-giving stream. And thereafter the place was renamed "the place of quarrel and

testing." It was another marker along the way in God's patient attempt to teach Israel to trust Him. Lest we judge the children of Israel too harshly, are we any different that they? How quickly will we question God's ample provision and care when we are hurting, or when our fortunes are bleak? Despite God's ample track record of care, the malady of "what have you one for me lately" still runs rampart through the human race. And all too often we treat government, our employers, and our parents and friends similarly. Few things can distort memory like a present suffering.

Secondly, memory is idealized when the hope-for-future seems too distant.

The risky point of any race is that moment when the muscles ache, but the finish line is not close enough to see. The risky point of a school curriculum is that moment when tuition bills and the monotony of study seems endless, and graduation is too far away to give hope.

The risky point of any endeavor is the long, broad middle. The euphoria of the start is the distant memory, and the euphoria of the finish is the distant hope. It is the darkest part of the tunnel, farthest from either opening of light. And it is this point in the journey when hope must win out over nostalgia, if we are to reach the finish. Israel was already in the long middle of their wilderness journey in the story from our lesson today. Like in our mid-point in our 40 days of Lent, Israel was enduring the middle of their 40 years of wilderness. This is the toughest part of all. This is the point when we must double our resolve in our Lenten disciplines, because it is easy to become stranded in the middle, far from the Mardi Gras of our beginning, and yet too far from the Easter of Jesus' resurrection, our deliverance.

So, don't quit, if you should lose sight of the end of the tunnel. Always remember: Jesus said, "We are the light of the world!" Let that light draw us to the end of our journey.

We selected that word "Light" as our theme for our Lenten journey. Let us be a light for each other and for the world around us.

Also remember, God's transmission does not have a reverse gear.

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