

Terrified...or Fascinated: A Question of Trust

Lent 4B, Numbers 21:4-9

Grace Church Newton

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Several weeks ago, tickets to an event I really wanted to go to opened up for sale. I marked the date and time in my calendar and scheduled my day around it so that I could be one of the first people to log onto the site in hopes of getting these tickets. I had to wait online. The system sent me an email telling me when it would be my turn to buy tickets. And I was thrilled when I received the purchase confirmation in my email box. Yes, it was too good to be true – two friends and I had tickets to see Krista Tippet speak live at the MFA. Yes, you can laugh. It was like the middle-aged woman’s version of scoring tickets to Taylor Swift or Beyonce. But I was excited!

If you’re *not* familiar with Krista Tippet, I commend her to you. She is a treasure. She was the force behind a podcast that emerged from Minnesota Public Radio over twenty years ago. Across more than 1200 episodes she welcomed onto her program the wise people of our time. People like the Dalai Lama, Maya Angelou, Mary Oliver, John O’Donohue, Thich Nhat Hanh, Desmond Tutu, Jane Goodall, Barbara Brown Taylor, and the Indigo Girls, among many, many others.

So I was thrilled to get tickets to hear her distillation of the wisdom she has taken in over these years. She said many things that I will continue ponder, but one in particular has been with me these last few days. When the formal interview time drew to a close and they invited audience questions, one person asked: “As a parent, how do you think about raising our children to have a spiritual and religious sensibility?” Good question. I probably don’t even need to say that we didn’t arrive at an answer. Instead, Krista paused thoughtfully, and said, “Parenting...is fascinating...or terrifying...depending on how you look at it.”

This has really been with me these last days. It’s been...on my mind. Let’s just stick with parenting for a moment, as an example. It *is* fascinating – to watch these small humans grow into their own people, in their own time, in a way that is very different from what might have been the case for their parents or for the elders in their lives. It’s *fascinating*. AND, there are certainly some moments in parenting that can be truly *terrifying*. But that is not exclusive to parenting. This same dynamic can be true across much of our lives. In our

own personal day-to-day, in our intimate family setting, in our community setting, we can have a perspective that something is fascinating...or terrifying. Fascinating...or frustrating. Fascinating...or annoying.

I see some of this same dynamic at play in the Hebrew Bible passage this morning in the reading from Numbers. This portion of the story of Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt – their forty year passage through the wilderness to a new land promised by God – this selection shares the last of what are called the “murmuring” stories [[Source 99](#)]. Five times through the exodus narrative the people complain bitterly about their circumstances. The refrain is consistent. They complain against Moses and – this time – against God, too: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? We have no food and no water,” they say. It doesn't show up here, but in earlier “murmurings,” they added something like: “It would have been better to stay in slavery in Egypt than to die here in the wilderness.” It would be better to stay with the *known* – even if it's not so good – than to venture into the *new*.

They are afraid. They don't know what's coming. If you'll remember back a few weeks ago, the first Sunday of Lent, we talked about how the number 40 shows up a lot in biblical storytelling – including the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. This number – 40 – symbolizes trial and hardship AND the new life that comes in its wake. Periods of 40 (in bible speak) might be seen as / the gestation of a new era. The Israelites were living through this disruption, through this discontinuity in their lives, in their location, in their culture. They were afraid.

Now I don't mean to suggest that the virtuous response to such extreme circumstances should be a sense of curiosity or fascination. It *was* a dangerous passage for them. But it does lead me to wonder about the very human response we see play out again and again in the exodus “murmuring” stories. When faced with change, we so often yearn for a past that we experienced as more certain. More desirable. Less disruptive. Often we want to try to keep things the way they were. We want // to go back to Egypt. At least we knew what that looked like. And this dynamic can happen in our personal lives and in our communal life. One of the commentators I was reading as I prepared for this morning quoted a pastor as saying: “**every church [I've] ever been part of,**” this pastor said, “**has had a 'Let's go back to Egypt!' Committee**” [[Source 98](#)]. We want to keep things the way they *have* been.

But, friends, Egypt is not an option. We can't go back. Whether we wish to go back because it was, in our memory, more desirable. Whether we wish to go back because – desirable or not – it was more known. It's not possible. Speakign of church and our faith lives, individually in our personal practices, as a local faith community here at Grace, across the larger church, indeed, across the full landscape of faith traditions. Our world has changed.

We could dispute whether the adjective “unprecedented” is overstating the case – personally, I find it an apt descriptor. Either way, we can’t go back. We can’t recapture some secure or more glowing era from the past.

At the heart of the “murmuring” stories is the question of trust. The Israelites inability to trust God is the basic issue. If the biblical record tries to convey any single message, it is that God can be trusted. God brought God’s people out of bondage in Egypt and saw them safely through their wilderness time. God restored the temple in Jerusalem and brought the people back from exile. If we move to the gospel record, we see God as revealed through Jesus: healing, reconciling, coming not to be served but to serve, lining up with the people outside the institutions of power – subverting power, turning things upside down in favor of the dispossessed. The King who serves, the King who remains true to his mission even as it puts him on a collision course with the powers of his day // even as it leads to his death. This is a God we can trust.

We want to hold tight to what is known. It is only human. We may want to go back to Egypt – as imperfect as it *actually* was – but Egypt is not an option. Instead, we carry our past with us. We treasure it. We learn from it. We build on it. AND we listen for God’s call to trust and to move into the future.

We can be frustrated...or curious. We can be annoyed...or open. We can be terrified...or fascinated to see where God is calling us NOW. Each of us. Individually and together.

Given who we have been in the past, where is God calling us today? May this be our question.

And may this be our prayer: God give us the curiosity to be *fascinated* about what will unfold for us now.

Amen.