

“Beyond Nostalgia” GPPC 9-24-17
Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

So my little red car is gone. Over the summer we got rid of the Ford Focus I drove for 11 years. It had about 164,000 miles on it. So we got Beth a new car, and I took her old Honda CRV that has about 240,000 miles on it. Lot of miles, but those cars are built to last and it's quiet, reliable, has no dents, has a trailer hitch, and comes with all-wheel drive.

Of course, I miss that little red car. What a flawless car! Never mind that the back bumper was covered with stickers and it had a dent from where I backed into a trailer hitch in a parking lot on a rainy day a few years ago. The front bumper was also pushed over a couple inches from when I pulled out in front of another driver in the spring. And the car rattled and the interior noise was deafening and exhausting, and the cramped back seat was absolutely miserable for long trips. Or short ones. The change compartment between the two front seats was broken so that everything might spill onto the floor at any moment. And there

Jeff Paschal

were stains on the seats from spilled church potluck casseroles. Boy, I miss that little red car. It was perfect. Perfect!

Beth has a new car and it comes with free satellite radio for three months. So when we ride together in her car I want to listen to music from my childhood--the 70s. Just imagine all the profound musical selections available for our listening pleasure. Wild Cherry and "Play that funky music white boy." There's disco music. The Bee Gees and Donna Summer. Sappy love songs. Anybody want to listen to Barry Manilow or The Carpenters? Rock--Bon Jovi and Kiss. Now imagine driving seven hours together in the car to Pittsburgh listening to that music. Pure bliss, right? I don't understand why Beth wanted to change the station ("Couldn't we at least listen to The Blend or turn off the radio?") I don't understand her. Do you?

Nostalgia. It can be a lot of fun, but it can also make you sick.

Exodus says the whole congregation of the Israelites is struggling with nostalgia as they complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The people have been traveling for a while, longer than they

Jeff Paschal

expected, and they're hungry. As the expression goes these days, their hunger and anger mix, and they start to get "hangry."

Notice what they say. "If only God had killed us back in Egypt. Back in Egypt we had all the meat we wanted to eat and bread until we were stuffed. We pretty much had a banquet, a party every day. 'Walk Like An Egyptian.' If only we'd have stayed back in Egypt and God had just killed us. That would've been so much better. But no. You two bozos have brought us out here in the wilderness to kill the whole bunch of us, every single person, starving us to death."

And God must be thinking, "Wait. What? Do you remember you were slaves in Egypt? You were oppressed in Egypt. You kept crying out for deliverance. And I heard you and came down and freed you with a mighty right hand. Don't you remember?"

It's easy to forget. Take the United States. We have elected leaders who promise to return our country to the 1950s.

The 1950s were the best years for our country, right? Life was simpler. Choices were less ambiguous. People were more civil. That's true, isn't it? The 1950s were wonderful in so many ways.

Jeff Paschal

But the 50s were the best, unless, of course, you were African-American. Then you were not allowed to use the Whites Only restroom or the Whites Only water fountain. You were denied the education, housing, and vocational opportunities that whites enjoyed.

The 50s were the best, unless, of course, you were female. Then you might not be allowed to work in a number of fields. If you were a teacher and got pregnant, you were expected to quit work. Heaven forbid that you would breastfeed your baby in public, because Americans would be scandalized by the sight of a woman's breast. If you were in a destructive marriage, tough luck, your husband could probably get away with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. And it was often difficult to obtain a divorce.

But the 50s were the best, unless, of course, you were in the LGBT community. Then you'd better stay in the closet or face not just insults and civil rights violations but violence and murder. And the civil and human rights of your partner? You must be kidding.

Shall we also throw in some Senator Joseph McCarthy too?

Jeff Paschal

Nostalgia has a way of sneaking up on us, doesn't it? We take a trip down memory lane, but often our memory is untrustworthy and out of focus. As the country song goes, "I miss Mayberry. Sitting on the front porch drinking Cherry Coke, where everything is black and white." But such simplicity was never completely real and it wasn't fair.

Nostalgia also happens in the church. A pastor begins serving a new congregation, but then constantly says, "Now when I was the pastor at First Mega-superior Church this is how it was done. I just loved that church." Yikes.

Congregations can get caught up in the past too. Here's a true story. In one congregation, an elder would sometimes turn to the new young pastor in a meeting and say, "Now when 'so and so' pastor emeritus was our pastor (and we were so fortunate to have him), this is how we did things." The new young pastor left after a few years there and the church conducted a survey to help members think about the future. One question was, "What do you like best about our church?" And three or four people said what they liked best about the church was

Jeff Paschal

the beloved pastor emeritus...who had been dead for several years.

Seriously. We can get stuck in nostalgia.

Look at the Israelites' complaints again. What drives them?

Hunger, yes, but also fear about the unknown and fear about how they're going to be fed, and lack of trust not just in Moses and Aaron, but more importantly lack of trust in God. So their memories turn back to something familiar, and what was familiar was slavery and death. Yet they complain and remember a past that was different from reality.

And God's response is amazing. We might expect God to say, "You ungrateful people. I've had it with you." But no. God says to Moses, "I'm going to rain bread from heaven for you. You'll get some each day. Twice as much on the sixth day. And it's a test." Will the people really trust God and observe the Sabbath?

Moses and Aaron call everybody together and say, "Listen, you're not complaining about us. You're complaining about God. But God's going to feed you meat in the evening and bread in the morning."

Jeff Paschal

But when the people see the bread in the morning, they say to each other, *man hu*, “What is it?” And Moses actually has to explain, “It’s the bread God has given you to eat.”

Strange but true. Sometimes when we’re so upset and so focused on what we’re used to, we can’t even recognize the new food God is providing. And we become susceptible to the false comfort and spiritual stagnation of nostalgia. And God loves us as we are but refuses to leave us as we are. God calls us beyond nostalgia.

So in every place and time, the church rummages through the refrigerator, pokes around the pantry, opens the kitchen drawers scrounging around to see what it needs to keep and what needs to go as we trust God in a new situation and time. What church doctrines have spoiled, and which still bring sustenance to the church and a needy world? Which church practices are stale and rancid, and which are still vibrant and life-giving? How does the way we organize and govern our churches serve as the wasted calories of junk food, or real sustenance for the mission God calls us to do? These are the questions the church asks in every age.

Jeff Paschal

And each of us as individuals is called to the same rummaging, searching adventure, but this time to contemplate our own lives. How might you and I be living in the past, in a comfortable nostalgia that masks our fear, our need for control, and spiritual inertia and does not require us to trust God to provide us with new food every day? Could your life and my life be more challenging and more fulfilling if we would be willing to look forward instead of backward so much?

One Sunday afternoon this summer, Beth and I took a trip to Hanging Rock State Park. On the way home we decided to try a restaurant we'd heard about, but never visited. It was out in the country. Just a hole in the wall. We walked, crunching across the gravel parking lot, and got onto the porch outside the restaurant. Dozens of people, apparently while waiting to get in during busy times, had written their names and various messages on the outside of the building with pens, pencils, and markers. Well, okay. Whatever floats your boat.

We went inside. Customers sat at booths and tables. Waitresses bustled from table to table. The hostess seated us in a booth. It took a good while, but eventually our waitress took our drink order. And then

Jeff Paschal

almost immediately another waitress came along with a cart and began unloading food on the table before us—hoe cakes, fried chicken, green beans, pintos, ham, mashed potatoes (homemade with lumps and butter), gravy, slaw, spiced apples, and meat loaf. The waitress left. And Beth and I looked at each other, puzzled. The food had just appeared. We had not ordered anything. Finally, I caught the waitress as you passed nearby. “Ma’am, we haven’t ordered any food.” “Oh, this must be your first time here,” she said. “We serve family style. We bring you everything, and then if you want more of anything, we bring you more.”

Sometimes in this life we sit at God’s table and complain that our order is taking too long, and it’s not what we ordered anyway, and it’s not the way it used to be.

But other times we take our place at that grand overflowing table to receive a meal we did not order, a meal we could not have expected, a meal prepared for a new place and day. And we leave that table with bellies and hearts that are full. Absolutely full. ©Jeff Paschal