

Welcome sermon for combined service; mish moments from Broman-Fulks & Farrington; bless KSC; BBQ
Fourth Faithfulness of God sermon:

God's faithfulness in transition (friendship, want, and tragedy to come)

Boone UMC; August 17 2014

Numbers 11:4-29 (JJ Brown reading)

4 The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leaks, the onions, and the garlic; 6 but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." 7 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. 8 The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. 9 When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. 10 Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. 11 So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? 13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say 'Give us meat to eat!' 14 I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15 If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery. 16 So the Lord say to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17 I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. 18 And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.' Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. 19 You shall eat meat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 20 but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?' 21 But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month!' 22 Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" 23 The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not!"

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Welcome, new students, thank you for spending this first Sunday of your college career in worship at our church. Welcome to all of you returning students and no-longer students, thank you for spending this Lord's day in worship at our church. Course Christians are all students, that's what the word disciple means. We don't normally all worship at one time. We have a contemporary service at 8:45 (think guitars and drums), we have a traditional one at 11 (think organ and robes) and a super-contemporary one at 10:55 in the gym we call Crossroads (louder guitars and drums). But today we all gather in one place to welcome students, and to see one another's faces we don't ordinarily see. I have to say it's all beautiful.

To give thanks, to see beauty, is a counter-cultural act. This week, more than usual, our airwaves have been full of outrage. We live in an anxious time. People are dying in Iraq, ethnic and religious minorities, like Christians. The right is outraged Obama isn't doing more. Robin Williams, who made so many laugh, takes his

own life. Some on the right react inappropriately. The left is outraged. An unarmed young man is killed in St. Louis, race is involved, and riots explode, the left and right and libertarians are all outraged for different reasons. Outrage everywhere. Outrage is sometimes justified, in these cases it may be, but notice what our world is not full of? Gratitude. This gathering is a counter-demonstration. We are here to praise God and give him thanks. I don't expect the media to notice, do you? God does. We do. That's all that matters.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons on the strange and wonderful faithfulness of God. Today we speak of God's faithfulness in transitions. Anybody here in transition? School starting back up, not just at ASU but for all our children this week. Adults caring for aging parents. Aging parents suddenly having to receive care. An old *New Yorker* cartoon has Adam and Eve leaving the garden and one says to the other, "We are living in a time of transition." Nothing stays the same in this world. How is God faithful when everything is changing and we are afraid?

One of the greatest things about the bible is the painful truth it tells. In the bible Jews and Christians say again and again 'look how awful we are!' 'Now look again!' 'We're even worse than you thought!' We say this because it shows just how deeply good God is. No other people tells their story so negatively. Think of how you learned US history—a series of triumphs, each more glorious than the last. Not Israel's history. Israel keeps going the wrong way. And God keeps being good. What good news for us. We keep transitioning the wrong way too. And God keeps being good to us.

Two points in this short sermon. ¹One, our whining. Our ingratitude. Our unfaithfulness.² And two God's creative abundance. Those are the two points of life too, not just of this sermon. We sin. God is good. Repeat.

Point one,³ our ingratitude. I don't know where you are on the spectrum of tolerance for transition. Say, like going away to college. Launching into a new relationship. Turning over a new leaf. I like change when it benefits me. When I get to be in control of it. And of course that's almost never part of the deal. I loved going off to college. My dad hugged me, handed me a peace symbol, a sign of *his* time in college (bless his heart, it was the 60s), and off I went. And it was great. Until my girlfriend back home broke up with me. And I got the worst grades I'd ever gotten. And I injured my back, and got depressed. Suddenly promises of the best four years of your life sounded empty. And apparently you get no tuition discount for being miserable. I'm glad for friends and a college fellowship group, in my case InterVarsity, that stood in, and saved my life. Thinking of Robin Williams this week, of kids who attempt suicide on our campus every semester, if you are in that dark place, grab someone's hand. If you see someone there, lend a hand. There is nothing more Christlike you can do for someone.

Often in transition we romanticize the past. The people in the story JJ read remember Egypt as a time of fish for free, cucumbers, melons, leaks, onions, garlic. They have amended the menu a little, and forgotten about the slavery part. Churches do this. A preacher I know says every church has a "back to Egypt" committee. Remember how great things were back in the good ole' days? Truth is, the good ole days were never that good. We can do this in our personal lives too. My wife Jaylynn trained as a missionary to Eastern Europe and the first thing they learned was when you're lonely in Hungary it doesn't mean you should have married the ex, it doesn't mean you shouldn't have gone, it just means you're lonely. And that's ok. Our memories play tricks on us. As I was writing this sermon one of my boys asked "When was the last time we had pancakes?" I responded, "this morning." Our poor memory is why the bible is genius. As soon as we're tempted to think too highly of ourselves or the past, the bible puts a foot out and trips us up from our pride.

¹ 1. Our ingratitude.

² 2. God's abundant kindness.

³ 1. Human ingratitude

I'm not that awesome it says.⁴ Say that with me, **I'm not that awesome**. Or in the bible's language we're all sinners. All of us. No exceptions. *And we always have been.*

Leaders are no exception to this, we whine just like everyone else. Religious leaders like me sometimes get to thinking we're better than others--and that's precisely why we keep getting in trouble. This isn't unique to us, it happens in business and academia and the military and politics too. We all think leadership means goodies for me and others are there to serve me and my needs. We even think God is there to meet my needs. Like God is some sort of butler or valet or servant, God, where are my melons and leaks? Moses whines just as bad as the people.⁵ "Why have you treated your servant so badly? . . . If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once." This is out of character for Moses. Usually when the people rebel and God gets angry Moses prays for them. That's what a leader is *supposed* to do, stand up for the people. Here Moses whines worse than any of em. This is important to notice—my generation and JJ's and those of us in charge will fail you students. We will. We're only human, doing the best we can, but we're sinners too. Professors, administrators, leaders, all will fail you. God only has sinners to work with. Go easy on us. We're doing our best.

What a motley crew we all are. Let me redescribe this way. Numbers says the rabble⁶ "had a strong craving." College kids are known for their cravings. I remember being able to put away a box of pizza by myself in a single setting. Now all I am supposed to eat is salad. There is a bit of a party culture on our campuses. Kids with freedom for the first time misuse it. It's fun to be away from parents on our own, we all get that and remember it. A strong craving and a bad memory and it can go too far. Then your leaders, us, those in charge. We overreact. Whine. Blame y'all. *Kids these days* and all that. During Plato's day in ancient Greece the elders complained about the youth of Athens. That was the 300s BC. There is nothing new under the sun. We all fail. All of us. What is God to do? The stereotype of the god of the Old Testament would respond with vengeance.

⁷The true, biblical God responds with gentleness. Grace. Creativity. Abundance. And this is after being good in the first place. That's what God always does. That's who God always is. God gives us the universe in creation and then as if that weren't enough God gives us salvation in Christ. God is always good to the undeserving. There it is, the whole gospel, all there is. God is always good to us undeserving.

God first gives the people manna. Food every day, but only enough for one day. If you gather more than one day's worth it rots. There's more manna, like the dew, every morning. When Jesus taught us to pray "Give us this day our *daily* bread" he was referring to manna. There is enough for one day, no more. There are no cupboards in the Promise Land. Just open armed receptivity. I grant, after 40 years, manna could have gotten a little bland. One writer I admire compares manna to grits.¹ The word manna in Hebrew means "what's that?" It's what Yankees say when they see grits the first time. God gives enough. Not as much as we want. But as much as we need. Grits every day, I think I'd complain too...

We live in the wealthiest country in the history of the world. Our poor people don't even starve. Our rich people have billions. And everybody thinks they don't have enough. And someone else is cheating. Everybody whines for more. One of the richest Americans ever, John D Rockefeller, asked how much was enough,⁸ said "Just a little bit more." He gave a lot to the church, and we had our hands out for just a bit more

⁴ Bold on screen

⁵ Num 11:11 & 15.

⁶ 11:4.

⁷ 2. God's abundant kindness

⁸ Rockefeller quote on screen plz

too. What if, instead of whining or asking for more,⁹ we gave thanks for what we have? That would be a radical act. Even a revolutionary one. What if every day on this campus, in this life, we all thanked God for every act of goodness? Saw a bumper sticker recently in town,¹⁰ “some feel the raindrops, others just get wet.” Let’s give thanks for every drop of God’s goodness this semester, this year, this lifetime.

The people ask for meat. Moses whines and asks to die. And what’s God do? Promises meat. Moses doesn’t believe it. Are there enough fish in the sea for all these people? God gives em meat. Enough to make them hate it, a month’s worth, till it comes out their nose and¹¹ “becomes loathsome.” Never say it was easier to believe in biblical times. Moses was on the mountain with God and he didn’t believe God could do what he said. The people had the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day and the ark of the covenant and saw the Red Sea parted and they whined for onions and garlic. It’s as hard to believe today as it ever was, but it was hard then too. In fact, don’t ask God for evidence of why you should believe or you may get so much it comes out your nose.

Careful what you wish for, the old adage goes. In our age of celebrity worship folks wish for fame and fortune. I only recently learned the adage,¹² “Whom the gods would destroy they first prosper.” Careful what you wish for.

What’s the point of this story? Deuteronomy 8:3 describes it this way,¹³ “God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you manna . . . to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Remember where else that comes up in scripture? When Jesus is tempted by the devil. He succeeds. He’s hungry 40 days and turns down bread, quoting that verse. Jesus constantly has to put up with people as whiny as Moses did, and Jesus doesn’t give up on them. He dies for them. For us. The point of this sermon is not just to say don’t crave too much, don’t whine, give thanks instead, though that’s right. It’s to say where we all fail, Jesus succeeds. He saves. He’s our only hope in life or death, in college or out, whoever and wherever we are. His transition from life to death to life again saves us. That’s how faithful God is in transitions.

There is a final bit of this passage we didn’t read. God makes good on his promises like he always does and gives Moses 70 fellow leaders to share his burden of leadership. Then two more *unauthorized* leaders receive the Holy Spirit too. Two outside the norm. Weirdos. Freaks. They even have weird names, Medad and Eldad. There are always freaks. One kid in my fraternity in college had an odd name. A strange home country. We made fun of him. I wonder what blessing the Lord would have had for me if I’d gotten to know him? Some of the best blessings I’ve ever had come from getting to know the unusual people and learning what they have to teach about God. This is why we’re launching King Street Church, to look for Jesus in those we’ve been told are most absent from him. In Numbers, the official leaders try to stop Medad and Eldad. But not Moses.¹⁴ “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” he says. Sometimes we leaders do get something right. Here’s the point. Look for God outside the norm. Outside the expected. Where you’re not supposed to. Because Jesus is always at work there. On the fringes. Where we don’t expect. Where don’t look. Look *there*. Precisely there. And God who always shares abundantly will show you something so beautiful your life will never be the same. Amen.

⁹ <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/Modules/ShowImage.aspx?imageid=1061>

¹⁰ On screen plz

¹¹ Num 11:20 on screen plz

¹² On screen plz

¹³ On screen plz

¹⁴ Num 11:29 on screen plz

ⁱ It's Barbara Brown Taylor's observation