

We had leeks in Egypt
 September 26, 2021
 St. Matthew's and St. Joseph
 The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
 Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29

May the God who....

Good Morning!

We are the ones: God's chosen, holy, anointed people. We are the ones, in this time and in this place, to embody God's hope and longing for our world. We are the ones entrusted to lead our communities, care for our families, repair the divisions of our land, and to create the new next. It's us: you and me, together.

Then the Israelites said, "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for free, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. Who will give us meat?"
(Numbers 11:5-6)

The Israelites have been journeying in the wilderness, following Moses for more than two years. The excitement of escape, the adrenaline of the crisis, has long since left them. The ease and amazement that manna from the sky appears each morning has grown thin. Because manna, morning, noon and night, even if it is bread from heaven, flavored with a hint of coriander, is getting old, it is getting dull, it is getting boring. In fact, truth be told, this whole journey is beginning to feel a whole lot like a camping trip from hell.

A never ending camping trip with the same people, with the same annoying habits, walking with them for hours every day, pitching tents every night, this is not how they thought it would be. Being God's chosen ones seems to have peaked, with embarrassing Pharaoh and then crossing the Red Sea— that was cool. This, what they are facing now—this is a grinding, monotonous routine, with little change in sight.

This is what I think it's like when a crisis becomes chronic.

The virus is spreading, we need to shut our buildings to keep each other safe.

Ok we can do that.

We can learn to zoom and live stream—this is interesting and compelling and different—at least for awhile.

We need to wear masks, well ok. It's not what I like. I don't enjoy speaking with a mask. It's hard for me to hear other people and my glasses are continually fogged, but there will be a vaccine soon so we can hold on.

Then there comes the vaccine. An absolute amazing culmination of messenger RNA technology. 95% protection. This is it—our game changer.

Then, the fear, the politics, the doubts, the outright lies, the polarizations and the new variants. The thick necked stubborn people.

The second surge, the third surge, and here we are half in and half out. Wanting desperately to be done with it all. And we aren't.
 When can we go back to normal?
 When can we be like we were before?

Does the old world, our prior way of being, does it even exist anymore?

Remember how amazing it was—*I think we even had leeks in Egypt, cucumbers and garlic for free.*

Friends, I'm done too. I'm so over this stuff I don't even know what to do some days.

And I do believe, we are, as those who wandered in that desert were, we are God's chosen ones for this time, in this perilous, transformative time, we are the ones who have the possibility of dreaming and creating the next new way of being, the new next hope for this fragile earth our island home.

Like the Israelites who wandered in the desert, going back to Egypt is not an option. The new normal, is not going to be just like it was before. We as people of faith, we as a church are forever changed. Some of these changes are enlivening. We know now, that so so many of us can livestream our services. We know can have on-going relationships and connections with people who live in far flung parts of the world. We can enjoy communal prayers from the comforts of our homes. We can save gas and not go back to church for an evening meeting.

Many of us have experienced the benefits of this chaotic time, but we've also seen the hard side, the underside, the vulnerable side. We have seen, in ways in which can no longer be ignored, we have seen the differences between those of us who have no choice but to leave our homes and risk being exposed to this virus because our jobs demand it, our livelihoods cannot be enacted on a screen: we drive buses, work in grocery stores, teach children, care for sick people: hundreds and thousands of sick people, we tend to loved ones who have died—many many of us have no choice but to be in the midst of this virus. Frequently, those of us who earn our salaries this way are paid much less than those of us who can stay home and work on line. The deep-seeded, long-lived disparities of race and class are now vividly displayed in high definition reality—no Netflix subscription required.

Having seen these images, we cannot go back. Egypt had leeks and cucumbers and comfy beds in which to sleep, but the disparities and the slavery of that place far outweighs what we long for and fondly remember.

Which means we are now much like Moses; calling out to God, in a mix of frustration and prayer, looking for the Holy of Holies to assist us in doing things differently, in seeing things differently. We like Moses are at a moment in time when we have encountered a roadblock, when it looks like we are lost, and the people are rebelling, we need, as the Israelites did, to

carry on in a completely different manner to a new world, that we have not yet seen and can only vaguely imagine.

Going back isn't feasible and staying as we are leads to death, so changing and going forward is our only option.

What might going forward look like for our various communities of faith? It will be somewhat different for every church, because what we do needs to reflect our unique contexts and the various needs of our surrounding neighborhoods.

Let me offer to you a few of the interesting new ministries in which some of our congregations are involved. St. James in Dexter has decided to raise money to retire all of the existing medical debt in Washtenaw county. How you ask? They are partnering with RIP Medical debt, a not for profit, which buys existing debt from collection agencies for pennies on the dollar and then uses the money raised by St. James to pay off the medical debt of people in most need in Washtenaw. St. James wants to raise \$5000 to eliminate the \$147,000 in Washtenaw and then eliminate another \$353,000 in Wayne county. I donated. You can too—and you can start a program at your own community of faith.

Then there is St. Michael's & All Angels in Lincoln Park, they are conducting a door to door survey of their neighbors: asking them what their biggest challenges are and what sort of changes they'd like to see. Once they complete their conversations, they'll have an amazing amount of information to decide what their next steps might be. Plus they will have had many, many conversations with their neighbors, the start of ongoing relationships. Imagine all those connections? All the people they now know.

What about the 1300 Afghan refugees who will soon be resettled here in MI? These are the people and families who assisted our troops during the Afghan war. All Saints' East Lansing, Christ Church Dearborn, Christ Church Cranbrook, St. David's, Southfield, St. Michael's, Grosse Pointe Woods and St. John's Royal Oak are just some of our congregations beginning to get involved in this amazing ministry of hospitality. How many more of us might get involved?

Lastly, St. Matthew's, St. Joe's in Detroit—which is celebrating their 176th anniversary this weekend has begun to host a Community Open Market. Once a month, they open their parking lot to local businesses to sell their wares: baked goods, arts and crafts, job recruiters are there, letting neighbors know of employment possibilities, COVID tests and COVID vaccines have been available. And all of this takes place with a beat, because local musicians are playing and setting the tone.

Friends these are just a few examples of what the new next for communities of faith might be. What about your congregation? What are you all being called to do? How are you to be in your community?

We can long for leeks back in Egypt, and lament all the things that we used to have, or we can ask God's blessing, invite God's help and get going, start walking, begin experimenting and bit by bit take ourselves with God's grace to the promised land.

As it was then, may it be so now.

Amen.