

April 22, 2018

Comfortable in Slavery

Exodus 4:29-31, 5:15-21; Numbers 14:1-4

After Moses accepted God's call to go back to Egypt, he met with his older brother Aaron, and went to meet with the elders of the Hebrews. This was the first hurdle: would the Hebrews listen to Moses and Aaron? We read Exodus 4, verses 29-31:

²⁹Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

Imagine you're a slave in Egypt. Your life is not your own. You spend your day baking mud bricks for use in the Pharaoh's building projects, and if you fall behind quota, you get beaten. So when Moses and Aaron show up doing amazing miracles and claiming to be sent by the God of the stories about Abraham to set you free, you're ready to jump at it, right? What have you got to lose?

I mean that, by the way. "What have you got to lose?" That's a real question. All of us, no matter how weak and downtrodden we might be, have things we wouldn't want to give up. Even as a Hebrew slave in Egypt you have a home to live in. You might have a family. You would have food. Slaves are a perishable resource, so slave owners have to at least feed them. You might have the community of other Israelite slaves and a routine and connections to your neighbors. Some of you slaves have even risen to positions of authority and become slave supervisors. You're still slaves, but you don't have to do the heavy lifting, and others look at you with respect. All that is at risk if you join Moses' rebellion.

You might want to roll your eyes and say, "Come on, why would anyone consciously choose to stay a slave?" But people do. It happens all the time. A woman chooses to stay with an abusive husband. Why? Maybe because in that home she has food and shelter. Maybe for the sake of the children. Maybe because she still remembers good times before the abuse. Maybe she's just afraid that if she leaves, things could get worse. Here's another one. A man remains for years in soul-crushingly dull job with a sadistic manager. Why? Maybe for security. For health insurance and a pension. For the sake of co-workers that you like. Or, again, maybe just because you don't know whether things might be even harder if you quit. The fact is, our default position is not to change. We'd rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of. As a general rule, we only choose to change when the thought of staying where we are becomes more horrible than the thought of risking the unknown. So when the Israelite elders embraced Moses' and Aaron's suggestion that they rebel against Egypt and leave, that's either a sign of how awful their slavery really was or a sign of how courageous they were, or both.

Anyway, they agree. Moses goes to Pharaoh to announce to him the Lord's demands. Pharaoh replies, "Huh, those Israelites must have too much free time on their hands if they have the leisure to ask for vacations. We should work them harder." So he tells the foremen to stop

providing them the straw that they need to make bricks, forcing them to gather their own straw, but to demand the same number of bricks per day. And if they miss the quota, beat them.

We read Exodus 5, verses 15-21:

¹⁵ Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, ‘Why do you treat your servants like this? ¹⁶No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, “Make bricks!” Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.’ ¹⁷He said, ‘You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.” ¹⁸Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.’ ¹⁹The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.’ ²⁰As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. ²¹They said to them, ‘The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’

Yeah, change can work that way. Sometimes we finally make the move and change, finally take arms against our sea of troubles and act against the status quo that we just can’t take any longer – and it backfires. Sometimes you step out in faith and fall into a pit. Sometimes things get worse. You finally leave that horrible job to follow your dream and do what you love, and you end up working longer hours for less pay and go bankrupt. Or you finally quit drinking and discover that you no longer have any friends, because that was all you and former friends ever did together. Now you’re lonely. Or you leave that abusive spouse and end up in a shelter facing years of poverty before you can get back on your feet. Your status quo may have been unbearable, but there’s no guarantee that changing will immediately make everything better. So don’t be too scornful of these Israelite supervisors who lost their enthusiasm for freedom so quickly. Change isn’t just scary. Change is hard.

Do it anyway. Because until you make that first move, until you face the possibility of going a different direction, you have no reason to hope that things might get better. Change may not fix our circumstances, at least not at once, but change brings hope. And without hope we are of all God’s creatures the most pathetic. Having been endowed by our creator with the gift of imagination – the quality that allows us to picture things being different than they are – we cannot turn away from hope. When we do, when we surrender possibility and accept what is, we do violence to our souls.

As many of you know, I was raised a Southern Baptist. *So* Southern Baptist. My parents were Southern Baptist missionaries, and all my best friends and mentors and role models were from that denomination. It never occurred to me, ever, in my childhood that I might be anything other than a Southern Baptist, and when I felt a call to ministry I began preparing for a lifetime as a Southern Baptist missionary or pastor. But my happy childhood context became less comfortable for me as a young adult. At Oklahoma Baptist University and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary I began to encounter and embrace new ideas, just at the time that Southern Baptists were turning the other direction – slamming the door on new ideas like women having

leadership roles in the church. I was turning one direction, and my church the other. I tried to stick it out and make it work, though.

Fast forward ten years. By this time I had moved to Wisconsin to serve a small Southern Baptist congregation, and I was miserable. I couldn't preach all that I really believed – about salvation, about the Bible, about women in ministry, about gay and lesbian human beings. If I had, I'd have lost my job. Shoot, I didn't even tell them I was a registered Democrat. So I did what I could on the surface and hid who I really was. And I was depressed. I was going into the church office and not even bothering to turn on the lights. Too much bother. I had high blood pressure, and I was hard to live with at home, but it never occurred to me to quit. Southern Baptist was all I knew. Even after Rebecca – more courageous than I – decided she couldn't take it anymore and started attending a Methodist church, I just hung on to my slavery. And it is slavery to bear the weight of pretending for years on end. Ask any one of my Southern Baptist gay friends.

Then Rebecca brought home a job posting for an associate pastor at the Methodist church, and I finally took a chance, applied for the job that was my first step toward freedom. Yes, there were consequences. My relationship with my parents suffered, and I completely lost other relationships. It didn't fix everything; it still took years for me to heal from that time of depression. But in changing, I rediscovered hope. My blood pressure's fine now.

Back to Moses and those suffering Israelites. Through Moses, God brought a series of plagues on Egypt, driving that great empire to its knees. In triumph, the Israelites and their entire households marched out of Egypt, crossed a sea as if on dry land, and finally were free. Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, they were free at last. And homeless. And in a rocky, waterless desert with no food.

The course of true change never does run smooth, does it? But God took care of the Israelites in the desert. They complained and whined and threatened to go back to Egypt, but God gave them what they needed when they needed it. Eventually, God led them to the very edge of the good land that he had promised them, the land of their ancestors. They were there! They had made it! They chose one man from each of their twelve tribes and sent them in to scout out the land. The scouts came back with reports of lush valleys and fertile vineyards, but then they said, "But we can't take that land! There are people already there! Living in walled cities! And some of them are, like, giants! We'd be slaughtered!"

We read Numbers 14, verse 1-4:

14 *Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' ⁴So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.'*

Up to this point I've illustrated the process of change using individual examples. But if change is messy with just one person, it is exponentially more complicated with groups. Two of the twelve spies – Joshua and Caleb – are ready to take the plunge. “We can do it! God has been with us this far and will be with us still! Don't turn back now!” But they are overwhelmingly outvoted. The Israelites move back into the desert and start scratching out a nomadic existence there. God doesn't abandon them, and they survive. Barely. For forty years. At last, when that generation that refused to take that risk had all died in their wilderness, the next generation moved into the Promised Land.

This, too, is what change is like. We don't ever decide to change and have a clear path. There are always fits and starts, second thoughts and regrets, retreats and relapses. There are consequences to face if we don't change, and there are consequences to face if we do. God *never* promised us that stepping out of our ruts would be easy, and anybody who tells you that it is is trying to sell you something.

But sometimes – *sometimes*, I said – it is necessary. Sometimes the world changes around us, and our only choice is either to change with it or crawl back into the darkness and close our eyes very very tightly and pretend everything will get better by itself. Don't do that. Pretending everything is fine when it isn't is a kind of bondage. I been there. Sometimes we have to face the pain of change, both as groups and as individuals. We in America are faced with the need to change at the group level. American culture is changing around us – demographically, racially, economically, socially, and politically – in ways that in a few years will make it unrecognizable to those of us over 50. We have a choice of either trusting God to go with us into this strange new world or staying behind in the wilderness and letting Emma Gonzalez take the next generation in in our place. And in the church – well, there's a new generation coming there, too, a generation that is basing their faith on compassion rather than doctrine, community rather than division, informal networks rather than denominations, service rather than success. The future church is in good hands. But until those leaders get here, we have a choice. Do we pretend things will get better by themselves or do we keep looking toward the land of promise, taking the first steps, and keeping our doors open for those leaders to come?

And, back to the individual level, there may be some of you who are faced with a need to make a deep change in your own life. This scripture is for you, too. Do not try to make your home in the wilderness; do not pretend to be comfortable in slavery. Take courage. Trust that God will walk you through the sea and stay beside you in the desert. Expect to have second thoughts and to dream of going back to Egypt, but stay the course. While you keep looking ahead and holding on to God's hand, there is hope, and there is a promised land.