

We are living in transitional times. This is true for the church and true for the world. I believe it was true before the global pandemic of COVID19, but it is even more apparent now.

Since the last pandemic, 100 years ago, the world has gone through huge changes. Many of them seemed to make the world better, faster, easier. With the advent of automobiles and telephones in the average ordinary household, it looked as though progress was the order of the day. Post-World War II economic expansion, which began to open ever so slightly in the 1950s and 60s to women and people of color, fueled growth and development which led to a brief period of sustained shared prosperity. Even as backlash to women and minority equality grew, so did technology such as computers, the internet, smart phones, and their attendant applications. All of this progress then led to a splintering into like-minded groups and increasing anxiety, depression, anger, and fear. Mix well and add a healthy dose of global pandemic and watch those already bubbling tensions erupt into a world on the edge. A world where somehow the church seems less important - or even relevant - than ever.

We find ourselves betwixt and between, even work is not necessarily in a brick and mortar location anymore, our communities are fractured, and church itself, the one place where intergenerational relationships are still possible, now has much of its population online. We feel more disconnected than ever, wondering what's happening to the world around us, and longing for a "golden past" that if we are honest with ourselves, we know never really existed.

The Israelite people are also in an "in-between" place, quite literally. They are traveling through the wilderness of Sin. Much as I would like to make a theological point based on the name - the Hebrew word "sin" is simply a name, not related at all to the English word or concept. "Sin" is the word from which Mount Sinai gets its name, so they are journeying near it. Nevertheless even without the theological implications, they are in

the wilderness, in the desert, in between where they came from and where they are going, a people stuck between a promise and its fulfillment.

If we pay attention here, we will note, though, that the scripture says the whole congregation “journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.” So these in between times can be not just big pains in the neck that we would prefer to avoid, but intentional spaces in which to find God. That God Godself has even *ordained*. The people are unhappy to be where they are - in the middle of nowhere without water to sustain them - and yet God is the one who has led them to be there. This suggests that just because God is the one who is leading does not mean that the path is easy.

In 2008, I went on a two-week Protestant Pastors’ Tour to the Holy Land. It was a combination pilgrimage and educational trip, one that both visited the sites where Jesus is said to have trod as well as engaged with what was going on there in the present day. In preparation, we read multiple books, watched films, and engaged with curriculum that taught us about the history of the area and the country of Israel. Upon arrival, not only did we go to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Galilee, but we met with leaders in political, religious and economic spheres who were engaged in promoting peace in the region. Everything from grassroots organizations to the prime minister’s chief of staff was on our schedule. It was an exhausting if clarifying trip - including the best falafel pita sandwich I ever had in my life - and one in which I truly came to understand how complicated the situation there is, with no easy fix in sight.

This past November I had the opportunity to return with the PCUSA’s Mosaic of Peace conference, a trip that also required lots of educational prep work, aided by the now ubiquitous use of Zoom - ah, the benefits of having gone through a global pandemic - and I looked forward to deepening my understanding of the situation on the ground in Israel/Palestine almost 15 years later - as well as perhaps another outrageously delicious falafel sandwich.

Given what we see on the news here in America, it will probably come as no surprise to you that things are no better than they were when I left a decade and a half ago. Indeed, they have very much deteriorated. Even situations that should be cut and dried - for example, the continued expensive legal fight for the Nassar family to keep their farm in Palestine, a farm for which they have a deed registered during the British Mandate in 1924 - almost 100 years ago. Nonetheless, their claim is delayed, ignored, and their property vandalized, including destruction of land and trees by the military authority operating in Palestine. This is just one example among countless that we observed in our time there, and it makes me wonder: why even bother? What is the point of lament anyway? What good does it do?

The people and indeed even Moses might be wondering the same thing in our scripture lesson. They are in the midst of this journey, halfway between here and there, and they do not like this in between place, this liminal space. They use the opportunity to give Moses a big fat thumbs down.

“Give us water to drink!” they demand. God has commanded they be where they are, so they are commanding Moses to take care of things. Moses immediately gets defensive, “Why are you messing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

He doesn't listen to their complaints. He doesn't hear their need. He takes their anxiety personally and even conflates his leadership with that of God's. This is of no help at all and, unsurprisingly, doesn't work to resolve the problem. People in church leadership, take note!

The Israelites are not wowed by his response and they come back at him harder than ever: “Hey! Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Things were so much better there. We had good food and water and we could take care of our children and livestock. Thanks for nothing!”

They, like us, have got those rose-colored glasses on, remembering the past as though it was great. They've forgotten that they were slaves in Egypt - they just want what they had!

We, too, can memorialize the past and forget the racism, the casual sexism, the expectation of heteronormativity, the repression of any kind of difference - remember: people were supposed to live lives that conformed to rigid roles defined by race and gender and class. But we forget and instead trumpet that the churches were full and the youth groups were vibrant and active and there were no sports on Sunday - people respected the church, for goodness sakes and now: where, oh where, has everyone gone?

Moses meanwhile harrumphs and does what he should have done in the first place: he goes to talk to God about it. But even when he goes to the right place, he's still all about himself: "What am I going to do about these people? They're ready to kill me!" he whines.

God responds immediately. BUT God doesn't soothe Moses's hurt feelings or grumbly attitude. God tells him what to do: "Go and choose some of the elders of Israel, walk on ahead of the people, taking your staff in hand with you - the one you struck the river with - and take it to a rock I will stand in front of you and show you at Horeb. You will strike it and water will pour out for the people."

Even though Moses doesn't tell God what the people want or need, God has been listening. God knows. God has heard the lament arising from them, even when they must feel like it's totally useless, like no one is paying attention at all.

As you heard the scripture read and as I retold the story, you may have only heard that God solved the problem. The people wanted water, and God - through the person of Moses and the vehicle of the staff - provided said water. But there are actually three things that happen in these directions God gives to Moses.

One: God tells Moses to grab some support - to take some elders with him. We are not called to do this work alone. Rather God invites to build community and meet people's needs, transform the world *together*.

Two: God says to "go on ahead of the people." In Hebrew this is *obr lphni eom* (עבר לפני), which literally means to "pass the faces of the people." Remember, these are people who have been shouting for Moses's head. They are not happy with him and they are making sure he understands that and God is telling him to walk among them, through them, alongside them surrounded and supported by a trusted community of elders to do God's bidding. In other words, God is saying, "Do not be afraid!" You can do this! Together.

Three: God says God will be standing right there in front of him at the rock at Horeb. On this journey to respond to the laments of the people, God is with Moses. ***God is with us.***

When I was in seminary and my daughter Grace was four years old, we were blessed to go on a vacation during the school's winter break. I had rented a car, and was happily surprised upon leaving the airport to discover I had received an upgrade. We lived in Manhattan at the time, and didn't own a car, so my daughter was delighted to see this enormous vehicle with a hatchback in which to play. She quickly grabbed the multitude of stuffed animals she had managed to convince me to bring and began to create worlds in rear of the vehicle while I dealt with luggage and installing the carseat and so on and so forth. When I was done, I told her to get into her seat while I got into mine.

When she failed to do so - too involved in the imaginary world she had created in the wayback - I strategized my response.

“Grace,” I wheedled, “Please come sit in your seat. I’m lonely without you. I’m all alone up here!”

Well. My little girl’s head appeared over the edge of the backseat and she folded her arms over the top of it.

“Mommy,” she chided. “You are **not** alone. God is with you!”

Out of the mouths of babes, right? God is with us. God calls us to be not afraid and to be in community as we both lament and respond to lament.

That’s what this Sunday is all about. It is World Communion Sunday during which we celebrate the unity of believers around the planet and the Sunday of our Peace & Global Witness Offering, which makes a difference globally and locally as we step out in faith on a myriad of issues in a variety of ways. This is where and when and how we see the upside of lament, not just crying out about the need for clean water or addressing climate change, or structural racism, systemic poverty, inequity in education - but in how it calls us to gather our communities, passing in front of the face of those who would quarrel with us, trusting that we are not alone. We have each other and we have God present with us even as we both cry out and act in concert with God’s grace and design toward the coming of God’s realm. May it be so. Today and until that day comes. Amen.