

At the Point of Exhaustion

Sermon 61 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 17, 2020

Exodus 17: 8-16

I don't know about you, but for me, this week has been harder than most. The reality of the pandemic has fully set in (or at least I think it has, for now). The long-road to recovery seems to stretch on into eternity.

Conversations about the realities of re-opening physical campuses and popular gathering places seem only to present more problems than solutions. And the once-seemingly-realistic idea that we might soon process into our sanctuary with the Christ candle leading the way and the whole congregation joyfully following behind... well, that idea seems more like a dream than actual possibility... at least for right now.

And this grief-filled realization is just one of so many lost hopes about what this year, this springtime, this summer might entail. A final school year for retiring teachers and graduating seniors. Years of academic rigor leading up to a moment long waited for, is now gone or reduced to an online or drive-by version of a socially distanced celebration. Vacations planned and paid for, cancelled.

Savings accounts becoming depleted as jobs are lost and income reduced. Unemployment promises are delayed by long wait times and disconnected processes.

The whole world is groaning with exhaustion as problems compound and solutions seem farther away than ever.

Joan Chittister writes in her book on struggle and hope:

It's not so much the struggle that weaves itself in and out of every life that unnerves us. Defeat we understand, much as it may deflate us momentarily. Rather, it is the bone-sore, deep-down, heart-wearying, never-ending weight of struggles, the effects of which never go away, that wears us down and turns our spirits into dust.

It's not the struggle itself that lays us low. It is the day-in, day-out tenacious clinging to the amorphous anger, the depression, the unacceptability of it all that stands to defeat us in the end. (Chittister, p70)

That about sums it up for many of us as we begin week 10 of social distancing and staying at home. All the positive aspects of working from home have flipped the script on our once over-programmed lives. Now our calendars are wiped clean (except for one-million zoom meetings) and

our hearts are yearning for community. These last ten weeks are probably the closest thing to wilderness that our church has ever experienced together.

So the reading for today speaks to us pretty directly... Today we find the “whole congregation of the Israelites” in the wilderness as they travel from Egypt toward the Promised Land. They’ve been on the road (so to speak) for a while now and they are beginning to grow weary. They’ve lost the adrenaline of the exodus from Egypt, when the Sea opened up and they walked across on dry land. They’ve lost confidence in their leader and their God, quarreling with one another and questioning, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (v.7).

And just as water begins to flow from the rock – which is the sign that God is indeed still with them in the wilderness – they are attacked by the Amalekites and they find themselves in a long, unexpected struggle for their lives. Moses tells Joshua to find some men to fight alongside him. And Moses, who was nearly 80 years old at this point, chose his own men, Aaron and Hur, to accompany him to the top of the hill, where he would watch the battle. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed in battle; but whenever he grew tired and he lowered his hand, Amelek would gain power. As the day grew long and the battle continued, Moses became exhausted so Aaron and Hur placed a stone underneath him, where he could

sit. And they stayed close by so that they could hold up his hands when he could no longer do it alone.

It's a fantastic story, truly... one that - like so many from the Old Testament - we read and remember... but this time, it feels like a story out of our own lives, doesn't it? I wonder how many of us feel a little bit like 80 year old Moses, standing on that hillside with all the responsibility in the world and muscles drawing near to the point of exhaustion? Maybe those muscles have been pushed to the limit juggling the weight of home-schooling our children while managing to work full-time jobs from home. Maybe those arms have grown weary of the house that is not so chaotic but rather painfully still or quiet... Maybe we've grown weary of isolation and we are longing for the company of friends and family. Maybe our bodies and our hearts are exhausted from the stress and worry of being in an unknown reality... we are not used to living day to day... are we?

It feels a bit like we are running a marathon we didn't know we need to train for. We thought - at Greystone - our marathon would be our kindness campaign... remember that? Early this year, we kicked off our year of kindness... a 12-month plan for growing kindness deep within the heart of ourselves, our church, and our community.

Together we dreamt up plans for missions, fellowship and faith formation opportunities that would stretch us and strengthen our kindness muscles, build our stamina for showing kindness ... so to speak.

On our kickoff Sunday, we held wooden hearts in our hands and blessed them as holy reminders that we were called to be God's people, to show God's loving-kindness in our world. The weeks following, we turned them into offering plates... each act of kindness, an offering to God. We hosted kindness tables on Super Tuesday offering baked goods and Sola Coffee to welcome neighbors to our campus. We read blogs that called us to consider how we might be kinder to ourselves, kinder to our families, and kinder online, in our digital spaces. We were gaining momentum; we could feel God at work in our lives teaching us how to be more kind to one another.

As time passed and we began to look ahead to new areas of focus, our creativity grew and the ideas kept coming! What if we got t-shirts to wear at all of our community events? What if we ran the Sola-5k to show kindness to our neighbors there? What if we wrote "You Matter" on the hearts and gave them away?

What if... what if... what if... And then, just as we were getting our footing... Coronavirus happened. Our attention shifted, and we started running a different kind of marathon... one that starts from our homes, not our

sanctuary... one that requires social distancing rather than community gatherings. This is not what we've been training for!

I wonder if Moses felt that way on top of the mountain as he struggled to hold up his weary hands?

Chittister writes:

Everyone is defeated sometime.

Many then quit the fray. But the really strong, the really committed, do not.

They decide instead whether or not the mountain is worth the climb. And if it is, no amount of wind can force them from the face of it.

They endure for the sake of enduring. They live to finish what they began. (74)

A few months ago, we set out to run a spiritual marathon, because we believed that our world was in desperate need of kindness. We knew it would be difficult, we knew we would grow weary - but like Moses who couldn't have imagined the Amalekites would attack - we couldn't have predicted this pandemic and all the changes it brought to our lives. But, in the midst of it all, we have decided to stay the course, to face the wind and climb the mountain... and whether or not we knew it... we're using those same muscles we began to train in the kindness campaign.

Hallway hugs have turned into porch drop-offs of sweet breads, cookies, and sourdough starters... Coffee and lunch dates have been replaced with zoom calls and cards in the mail. Weekly gatherings on our church campus have shifted into deacon phone calls, online worship, and digital Sunday schools... This is not the way we thought the marathon would play out... but kindness is alive and growing within the heart of Greystone! In these and so many other simple acts of kindness, we are discovering that we can endure this challenge together.

Chittister writes:

There is a capacity for endurance in the human heart. It persists even when every obvious avenue is closed. It beats with life even in the midst of death.

It endures, not because there is no struggle to obstruct it, but because it is precisely the struggle itself that sharpens its focus, ... makes clear its real meaning. (78)

Perhaps in this unanticipated struggle, we are rediscovering our real meaning? Perhaps even as our arms grow weary from all that we are holding up, we are learning that we are not alone... but we truly are all in this together...

So may God take our hearts and fill them with kindness that will not stop when the challenges arise, but kindness that persists and shows up to support the arms of our sisters and brothers as they grow weary.

Kindness that refuses to be diminished by the stress of an unknown future... And kindness that reflects the heart of God to a world of people nearing the point of exhaustion.