

Covenant Presbyterian Church
September 27, 2020
Exodus 16 & 17 Selected Verses
Are We There Yet?

Exodus 16

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but” against the LORD. ⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Exodus 17

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

This is the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Cognitive philosophers study uncertainty. Their theories can lend us a hand, both in understanding the Israelite's state of mind as they wandered in the wilderness, following this a man Moses (who claimed to see a burning bush that was not consumed, and claimed to hear the voice of God), and our own state of mind, as we struggle through COVID, an election season, climate change, and civil disobedience.

Uncertainty scientists study how humans cope with three kinds of uncertainty, and its opposite, the lack of uncertainty. As it turns out, too much uncertainty and too much certainty can both drive human beings to distraction.

First, there is **expected uncertainty**, which is where we live most of our lives, when things are “normal,” that is, when we know what we don't know, within a certain frame of reference. With expected uncertainty, within an existing mental construct, we are able to make predictions based on context. For example, imagine a certain restaurant that has dishes you like 80 % of the time. Eight out of ten times you visit, you leave satisfied. In other words, you know exactly how uncertain your satisfaction will be. Only 20%. This we might call our “comfort zone.”

Second, there is **too much certainty**: Take the case of Max Hawkins: Max had met his goals early in life, fitting his life almost exactly to his preferences; however, in exchange, his life had too much certainty. He woke at 7 am, had coffee at his favorite shop, cycled 15 minutes to work, etc. At any given time, anyone could predict his whereabouts. With too much certainty in his life, Max felt trapped, imprisoned.

So he set out on a great adventure: he tried out the third case, **unexpected uncertainty**: for two years, Max led his life according to a series of randomized algorithms. A diet generator told him what to eat, an algorithmic travel agent picked out the city where – having gone

freelance – he would live for the next two months, a random Spotify playlist provided music for the journey, and a random Facebook-event selector told an Uber driver where to take him when he got there. The algorithms dictated not just where to go, what to eat and what leisure activities he should engage in, but even what clothes and hairstyles (he ended up needing several wigs) he should adopt. He even has a chest tattoo selected randomly from images on the web.

Max challenged his own assumptions about his preferences – he challenged his brain to grow beyond what he knew – pressing new knowledge into being from what he already knew. He voluntarily challenged his mental constructs. According to these “uncertainty scientists,”

[Miller, Nave, Deane, & Clark:](#)

This form of uncertainty can in fact be very beneficial for organisms like us. This is just the sort of uncertainty that can help us break out of bad habits and escape our own self-limitations – [those] good enough solutions that fall far short of what we might achieve by ‘pushing on through.’

Max pushed himself outside his bubble and in doing so, he learned new things about himself and his world. He exercised the plasticity of his brain and it energized him!

The third level of uncertainty is called “**volitivity.**” You might call this “way outside one’s comfort zone,” so far outside as to be unimaginable, unrecognizable. For example, in June of 2020, COVID-19-related issues afflicting the world were joined by massive unrest and protests following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. These kinds of sudden dramatic shifts define the paradigm of high volatility.

In times of volatility, statistics can be unreliable, and whatever we may “learn” from the experience can be likewise unreliable. It is not necessarily inaccurate, and it is not necessarily accurate either. Only time will tell. Adapting to the rate of uncertainty during times of great volatility plays tricks on our brains. We simply don’t have enough reliable information to make solid decisions. For example, adapting to the COVID environment in the midst of a startling rate

of change in our ability to process social media and other kinds of information, along with peaceful and violent disruption in the streets, and the breakdown of governmental norms and political processes stuns human cognition, and can even leave it traumatized.

Specifically, just because one has not yet contracted the virus doesn't mean that the behaviors we have trusted to be "safe" are actually safe. Who becomes infected with the virus is even more uncertain than one might expect from **unexpected uncertainty**. It is in many respects infection is much more random or **volatile** than we would like to believe. Along with all the rest of the change that the 21st century has brought us, we now walk around like Alice in Wonderland - or like the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness.

It is hard to imagine that the Hebrews endured *too much* certainty as slaves in Egypt. The life of a slave is inherently uncertain – and the life of anyone living before the common era was likely to be less certain than the life of most of us here today, even with our current volatility. Yet, it is clear from the text that the Hebrews or Israelites perceived themselves as enjoying greater certainty (or expected uncertainty) in Egypt than they did following the man Moses, who by his own claim – saw, heard, and did things out of the ordinary.

Suffering a lack of food and water is certainly an even greater state of uncertainty that unexpected uncertainty. Crossing the Red Sea, witnessing the drowning of their Egyptian adversaries, and suffering hunger and thirst in the wilderness produces trauma in addition to volatility. And trauma interferes with cognition and can continue to interfere on a long-term basis. The time in the wilderness challenged the Israelites' assumptions about who they were and whose they were. It forged their identity, an identity which has lasted 5, 781 years, an identity of deep resistance, resilience and strength. Over the test of time, the ten commandments prevailed

over the worship of a golden calf, but at the time, the Hebrews journeyed through the harsh reality of chaos.

It is in these times of volatility and trauma, that faith takes its place and comes alive. The stories of God's faithfulness lend us their hope and comfort; our faith traditions offer us an anchor in a sea of uncertainty. Unexpected uncertainty and even volatility offer us an opportunity to grow spiritually and to grow together, even an opportunity to grow culturally and collectively. Even when we can't possibly always get it right.

Even the uncertainty scientists think so. They report:

Structured practices such as meditation and mindfulness, serve to retrain our own constraining expectations. A useful tool here is training attention to actively drop our sampling towards the sensory edge, and away from our set patterns of thinking, disengaging the expectation of high-level stability itself. When this succeeds, we can live in the moment while still dealing with the changing contingencies of daily life. Such practices reflect something important yet not commonly practiced – our very human ability to turn our own mental states into objects for reflection and action. This brings us full-circle to Max, and that key thread in the process that led to his extreme attempt to see beyond his normal web of expectations about his daily life.

We, like the Hebrews, are living through one great big God moment, learning about God, learning about ourselves, our expectations, and each other, just as the Hebrews did 5,781 years ago. We are learning what it means to be human in an uncertain world. Some of what we learn may turn out to be a golden calf or a red herring. Yet, what we have learned before remains True: as true the ancient rituals and celebrations of Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. We are learning that God is with us and feeds us with the bread of heaven, that God is with us and for us when we walk through the dangerous waters of Baptism that wash us clean and make us one in Christ, our sure and certain hope. We are learning once again of the opportunity to practice the radical trust that God offered Abraham and Sara, Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and

Aaron and Miriam. We are learning once again of the opportunity to practice the radical trust that God offers us.