

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 27, 2020 (Proper 21A)

In-between times are hard. The ancient Israelites certainly experienced this as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. For two full generations they lived in between slavery and freedom; between subjugation in Egypt and the Promised Land to which they were called. Forty years is a long time to be in limbo. But that's how long they wandered in the wilderness with Moses; aware of God's promise that they would one day enter into a land flowing with milk and honey, but skeptical of whether this promise would actually come to fruition.

After the dramatic parting of the Red Sea, an event that broke the bonds of their enslavement, they entered into a period of waiting and wandering and wondering. They had left the shore of certainty, painful and dehumanizing as it was, for the uncharted waters of uncertainty. And uncertainty is a tough place in which to live and move and have your being. We much prefer to have our feet on the solid ground of certitude.

Which is why, once the euphoria of tossing aside Pharaoh's yoke had waned and the memory of the Red Sea crossing had faded, the grumbling began. And, oh, did the Israelites grumble. They complained about having to wander in the wilderness; they complained about Moses' leadership; they complained about the lack of food; they complained about the lack of water; when God sent down manna from heaven, rather than reveling in this mysterious and nourishing substance, they complained about the lack of meat. Signs of God's presence were everywhere, and yet it was never enough.

This morning's complaint is thirst. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt," they demand to know, "to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Because of course that was Moses' plan all along — the plagues, the passover, the parting of the Red Sea it was all to set his people free so they could die of thirst in the wilderness.

It's a wonder Moses didn't just throw up his hands and quit. And who could've blamed him? He didn't sign up to be God's complaint department, and yet there he was, in an untenable situation standing between God and God's people. In-between times are hard — on everybody.

We too are in an in-between time right now. Waiting for this pandemic to end; wondering how it will affect our loved ones; wandering in the wilderness of uncertainty. Our in-between time surely won't last for 40 years, but even after six months of this, you can see how easy it would be to fall into complaining. Because there is a lot to complain about! The masks and the lack of contact with loved ones; the inability to really go anywhere; the economic uncertainty; the fear of getting the virus; the not being able to worship in-person. And I admit there are days when all I want to do is hit the fast forward button on life and just get through this period with all its inconveniences and burdens and struggles.

This past week, on Friday morning, our oldest and perhaps dearest parishioner, Mary Ellen Hatfield, died peacefully at the hospice home up on Turkey Hill. I was able to be with her and pray with her earlier in the week and she was the same faithful, elegant, gentle soul she always has been. And after giving her communion — the first time in six months I've given *anyone* the sacrament — and saying a blessing over her, she seamlessly turned the tables and started to pray for *me*. This 98-year-old woman lying in great weakness upon the deathbed from which she would never emerge, took my hand, looked into my eyes, and began praying for me and my ministry and for all the people at St. John's who make up this church that she so dearly loved.

And as I sat in her room the night before she died and prayed over her, surrounded by flowers and family photos and over 100 cards from members of this congregation and beyond, I was distinctly aware of two things. First, I was there on behalf of all of you. You were with me in that room as she prepared to enter paradise. And second that this was very much an in-between time. In-between life and death; in-between the *hope* of the Resurrection and the very Resurrection itself; in-between the despair of losing a loved one and the joy of celebrating a beautiful life.

In-between times are hard. Yet Mary Ellen's witness reminds us that there is life and grace even in these difficult in-between times. Setting aside our grumbling at the things we cannot control and focusing on the blessings and small graces of God's presence is what sees us through. There is life and peace in the in-between, if we open our eyes to see it.

Now, I'm sure some of the Israelites understood this. But complaints ring louder than contentment. So we hear about all the murmuring that took place, we hear about the grievances and the discontentment. But we don't hear about the people who stopped complaining and started living. After all, life goes on even in the midst of the uncertainty of in-between times. It wasn't just wandering that took place in the wilderness, it was life.

The rhythms of life continued even as the wilderness experience went on and on and on. There was death and there was birth; relationships thrived and relationships fractured; dreams were fulfilled and hopes were dashed; joy abounded and grief took hold. In other words, life — in all its glory and all its pain — happened. And the wisest ones, even if their voices weren't recorded in

Scripture, surely pointed this out to the community. They acknowledged the uncertainty of the situation, grieved for what they had lost, and then simply went on living.

Yes, Mary Ellen desperately missed in-person worship at St. John's. A few months ago as this pandemic was stretching out, I called to check in with her and she said to me, "I even miss the people at church I never talk to." Her love for St. John's ran deep. And it grieves my heart that she was not able to be in this building one last time.

But her faith transcended this particular church, no matter how much she missed it. She knew that, ultimately life itself is an in-between time. We wander this earth in between our birth and our death. And everything in between is a gift from God.

Like Mary Ellen, I invite you to embrace the in-between times of your life. Don't neglect the beauty that surrounds you. Or fail to take opportunities to show kindness to others. It's easy to complain, of course. Sometimes it's even fun and mildly therapeutic. But in the end, life is about love. Loving others, loving God, loving life itself.