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Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

For the past couple of weeks, some of us have been studying the reluctant Old Testament prophet named Moses and how God used him to bring his beloved people out of Egypt. I can't help but see the parallels between the story of the Israelites and what the Church is going through as we've explored Adam Hamilton's reflections on Moses in our study. The Church today is very much like the Israelites in the wilderness, no longer where we used to be but a little unsure about where we are going.

Almost a year after the exodus from Egypt, we find the Israelites camping just a few miles from the promised land. God then tells Moses to send some spies into the land to scout out and report back what they see. The scouts come back saying, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large..." Caleb, who was one of the scouts, encouraged the people of Israel to go and take the land, but the rest of the spies brought an unfavorable report to the people saying that the people who inhabit the land are too strong. The Israelites responded with anger toward Moses and Aaron saying, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt" (Numbers 14:2-4).

These people were on the threshold of the land that was promised to them. It was just around the corner and there they are, paralyzed by fear. These people had just witnessed miracle after miracle for the last year. They had been pulled out of Egypt by the very hand of God, were protected and cared for by God in the wilderness, and are now looking out over the land God was to give them contemplating returning to Egypt. How ridiculous, right!

But we are not so different, are we? It doesn't matter how many times God has protected us, called us, equipped us, our first inclination is to hold on to what was, rather than risk with God what could be. We, like the Israelites, look back on our past with rose-colored glasses thinking that it would be better to go back to the "good old days" because things were simpler back then. At least, then we knew what to expect. But this just isn't true. It is easier for us to hold on to what we know, rather than enter into the unknown; and that is why looking back feels safer than moving forward even if the past wasn't as perfect as we remember.

Pastor Tim reminded us last week that we need to change our priorities. We do not come to church to participate in the institution of church. For too long, the institution of the church has gotten in the way of our true purpose, our true calling. We are the church when we remember that Jesus is Lord. This is the foundational truth that carries us into an unknown future. This is the truth that allows us to face the giants in the promised land, rather than run with fear back to being enslaved in Egypt. If Jesus is Lord today and forever, then we have nothing to fear as we move into an unknown future. Amen? Amen.

Okay - so let's build on this foundation. This morning, we ask the question "Want to come to church?" and respond with another question, "Whose church?" As much as we like to think that this church is ours, it is not ours. If Jesus is Lord of all, then the church belongs to Jesus. And if this church belongs to Jesus, then it also belongs to all of God's children. We often think about the church belonging to the ones who are here, but it is also important for us to notice the ones that are not here because the church belongs to them just as much as it does to those of us sitting here today.

Pastor Tim helped to prime us for this conversation with his teaching moment on nomads, prodigals and exiles. These are the people that researchers call the “nones.” Not nuns, but nones. On surveys, these are the people who when asked what their religion is will most likely mark “none.” I am going to share three stories from David Kinnamen’s book, *You Lost Me*, because hearing these stories helps us understand why these nomads, prodigals and exiles are not in the church.

First is Kelly who would be classified as a nomad. Kelly struggles with an anxiety disorder which has made it difficult for her to feel like she belonged in church. As a teenager, she struggled to connect with her youth group. When she went off to college, she was immediately turned off by the campus ministry because their ministry was driven by “quotas” for saving people. Kelly’s parents had friends at church who told them that they had done a bad job raising Kelly because she was struggling with how to relate to church. Kelly prayed and read her Bible regularly but had completely lost faith in the church.

Next, we have Mike who would fit the classification of a prodigal, or an ex-Christian. Mike loved science and was an intellectual. However, his Catholic church upbringing made it clear that the church was intimidating by his intellect and his inquiry. He eventually left the church when he found himself regularly at odds with his parish leaders.

And finally, we have Nathan who exemplifies an exile. Nathan and his family were very active in the church as he was growing up until his parents got divorced. The way the church handled this caused him to become volatile toward the church. He was not embarrassed by his faith but was embarrassed by the Christian subculture that he regularly encountered. He seemed willing to explore faith but had been deeply hurt by the institutional church.

While each of these stories is unique, they do have something in common. These people who are leaving the church often do not do so because they have lost their faith in God, but because they have lost their faith in the church. The church, as a whole, needs to repent for the ways that we have contributed to their leaving and their continued disengagement.

God hopes that the church can be a home for everyone but do we communicate that in our invitation and our welcome? This is the beauty of the story of the prodigal son. The son who leaves his father’s house and squanders his inheritance realizes that he has lost himself along the way. As he sat there, longing for the slop being feed to the pigs, he realized that there was more to life. He felt this deep sense of unworthiness to return to his father’s house, but his hunger for something more drove him home. There, he was met not with judgment or criticism. He was not greeted with a lecture or questions about his intentions, but with celebration. He was met by a merciful father who saw him while he was still a far way off and didn’t wait for him to arrive but ran out to meet him on his way.

We often relate ourselves to the either the younger son or the older son in this story, but Henri Nouwen wonders what it would look like if we related ourselves to the father. What would it look like if we embodied the love and mercy of the father? To offer the freedom to reject the love that is freely given but also planting the seed of longing so that they cannot help themselves but to return to the father’s house. The calling of the church is to answer the call to be like the father: to meet the lost as they seek to answer the human longing for love and compassion; to proclaim a God who doesn’t wait for us to choose him but who runs out to meet us where we are with loving arms wide open. So ,we invite them, not to **our** church, but to the Lord’s church where all are welcome, all are worthy, and all are celebrated because God loves them first even before they choose God.

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Next week, Pastor Tim will continue this conversation about how to meet people where they are as we continue to work at being invitational. Keep this image of the Father in your mind, running out to greet the returning son as we explore how to reengage the “nones” in faith.

Even as we think about those that are not here in church and how to encourage their faith, I pray today that each of you know the depth and the breadth of God’s love for you. Even though we focus today on the nomads, prodigals and exiles, each of us battles with self-rejection and self-loathing that makes us at times question our worthiness. While this may not have caused us to leave the church, it is still a reality that pulls us away from our God. Just as much as God seeks the lost, God seeks you. God awaits you like a loving parent, ready with open arms. And as we willingly accept God’s loving embrace, we will be transformed by it allowing us to extend the same compassion and forgiveness to a world who so desperately needs it. As the Father loves you, so let us love the lost and the least. Amen.