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St. Andrew's, Encinitas
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Lent 4

This morning's readings are a bit of a roller coaster, aren't they? We start with the Israelites in the desert, fresh out of Egypt, first complaining about their deliverance and then receiving raw divine wrath. Then we get a psalm praising God's goodness to everyone who doesn't "rebel," then we get Paul reminding us that we are powerless and subject only to God's grace, and then we have Jesus saying one of the most often quoted Bible verses, John 3.16. Can we all say that together? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

That sentence has been a comfort and inspiration for so many over the ages. It has inspired songs, poems, prophets, martyrs, and probably some of us here. But even amidst that comfort, we still have all those jealous moments in life, not unlike the Israelites in the desert. In fact, we are probably more like them most of the time. Those holy interruptions that Brenda preached on last week more often feel, at least initially, like stumbling blocks to our success, our advancement, the things WE think we need, the things WE want out of life. What gets in the way of our priorities often gets stuck in our craw, right? We get frustrated, irritable, and downright ornery.

And worst of all, we see that someone else got exactly what we wanted. That promotion, that job, that house, that relationship, that whatever. All of us can relate to that, being sick with envy, and part of us is probably still locked in that jealous moment. Deep seated anger that does not depart, like a scar on our hearts, lurking quietly in the back of our mind, just below the surface of societally enforced pleasantries. We all know the feeling.

I remember a time when I was in preschool. I was playing with this awesome, bright red firetruck. I was having a blast with it, rescuing other toys from certain doom. I got up for a moment, to fetch something or use the facilities, and when I came back, MY fire truck was gone! The shock of a toddler gripped me when I saw another child had taken the toy firetruck, MY firetruck, and was playing with it. The nerve of the guy! I remember snatching it back. Well, that didn't go well, because the teachers saw, and had a word with me. I remember the righteous anger at the injustice done to me by a flawed system. How dare they side with the nefarious scoundrel who took what was mine! Never mind the fact that he had found it the exact same way I did, lying in a communal play area, it was MINE! Thereafter, I found myself without a snack, just a sad cup of grape juice, and an empty napkin to commiserate with as everyone else enjoyed cookies.

Now, I'd love to think I've left that sort of selfishness behind, but the truth is, that toddler transformed is still in me, and still kind of upset about that firetruck, even though I cognitively know how silly the whole thing really was in retrospect. But I cannot make that toddler who I was repent of the anger at my own frustration, and my envy of those more fortunate than me. What can any of us do with those feelings? Our anger at our own frustration, and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves.

Much like the emotional roller coaster of this morning's readings, doesn't our life cycle kind of replicate that, in a way? We go through the hard things, the things we don't want, and sometimes watch others enjoy the things we desperately worked for or thought we deserved. God still blesses us though, right? Aren't we assured by the idea of Jesus coming to redeem us all from our own selfishness? God loved us so, that the incarnate word made flesh, Jesus, came to live in our shoes, even if only once.

And yet, that nagging feeling still rises in us, right? Like a weed in an unkempt garden, it chokes off the good things we really want there and grows out of control before we can get back to tend to that part of our soul. I don't think anyone wants to live a life of anger and envy, and yet we cannot help ourselves sometimes, right? I'm here to remind us that that's not entirely our fault. As Brenda put so well last week, "To be the most successful, in order to satiate an ever-growing appetite for progress, people are exploited." And even our own sense of what's good for ourselves is turned on us frequently. Societal pressure is almost always pointed towards the next thing, the younger, the more lustily beautiful, the bigger, the better, the more opulent, the more exclusive. Why be content with what we have when we can sell our soul for so much more?

That pressure is always going to be there, unfortunately. And there will always be some way for us to see how we don't have all that we want. From commercials, to the lottery, to the car you want and see someone else driving, there are always going to be ways for us to get frustrated and kick ourselves while we're already down. And really, that's where one of the great gifts of Lent comes into play. The grit and sand we find at the font by the door into this sanctuary, for this season, reminds us what many of us heard in our Ash Wednesday liturgy. We are made but of dust, and to dust we shall return. That includes all those things we lust after in life. That includes our desires. All of this stuff belongs to God, and it will all return to God.

By that same truth, each of us is already blessed then. Because when God created the vastness of this universe and the unique life of this planet, it was all declared good, repeatedly. And not "good" as in acceptable, but good in an ever-expanding sense. This stuff God made and which we continue to create with, our fibers, our being, is something God rested on after all was created. It was so good, so wonderfully made, that God decided to enjoy the wonders of it all on the Sabbath. The irony of the Israelites complaining in the desert is that the whole journey, awful as it may have felt for them, is that it was their blessing, because God was walking it with them. Their feelings were valid, their situation is not one any of us would want to be in. But neither was their captivity in the land of Egypt, even though the grass always looks greener on the other side. We are not beings who account for the bigger picture.

Now I want to be clear, I am not saying that God sends us into this world to suffer, and not everything we go through is God's will, I don't advocate that kind of theology. What I do believe, at the very core of my being, is that God is so tremendously awesome that there is no situation in which we are separated from the love of God. That even the darkest and worst parts of our lives which we try to hide from on the surface is something treasured by God, because God said that our very existence is good.

No matter what progressive, neo-liberal, capitalistic consumerism tells us, by God's grace we are blessed for the mere fact of our very existence. That doesn't mean we should just settle in for the ride and accept the crumbs of this world. But it does mean we should temper our expectations of our own progress, not because we can't have the things we want, but because often the things we want cloud our spiritual sight. For by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Repent of our frustrations and envy so that we can live as the fruit of blessing, which God has prepared from before the beginning.