

Last week, today and for the next three weeks the Sunday Gospel comes from John, Chapter Six. Today, I'd like to skip that, and focus this homily on the first reading about the Israelites wandering in the desert. They were "grumbling" against God, and despairing the journey. And, as I reflected on this story, I thought of a beautiful but sad song from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, "I Dreamed a Dream" and Joyce, our Cantor, and Vlad will set the context for that:

"I had a dream that life would be
So different than the hell I'm living,
So different now than what it seemed,
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed
Victor Hugo's Les Miserables

What causes such despair? What's the murderer of dreams? What might be killing yours?

Our Old Testament reading today contains a similar song. The children of Israel are wandering in the wilderness of the desert. Only months before, God delivered them from the forces of Pharaoh and from slavery in Egypt! They saw God's power divide the Red Sea. They witnessed God's endorsement for Moses, their leader. You would think they would never doubt the mercy and provision of God.

Yet here they are: "grumbling" against the leadership of Moses. And worse – they're SO fearful that God will abandon them in the wilderness that some of them are longing to return to Egypt. Back to Egypt? Can you imagine that? Egypt – the place of slave labor. Egypt – the place of an angry Pharaoh. Egypt – the place of death. "The devil you know often seems better than the one you don't!"

It only took God a few weeks to get Israel out of Egypt. But it took Him 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.

How could this be? How can their despair – or ours – lead us back to a place of bondage and destruction? What can we learn from this sad chapter in Israel's story?

Two points: First – Israel remembered the past – better than it was. They say hindsight is 20/20. But is it really? Just consider a sample of childhood recollections – as told by parents to children: "When I was a kid – I walked to school; never talked back or cursed; got good marks; never missed a Sunday at Church; there was hardly any crime. Everyone looked out for each other." You kids don't know how easy you've got it and the value of hard work. Really? Was it actually that good?

Doesn't memory often edit and/or magnify? We tend to remember the past in a glorified way. School days were brighter; early marriage was easier; kids were better behaved; society was gentler – than any of it really was. We simply edit out of our memory the difficult or painful parts of the past.

Israel certainly remembered Egypt – *better* than it was. Already they had forgotten the hardships, the slavery, and the brutality of the Pharaoh. When confronted with the discomfort of hunger in the desert, they became fearful. Back in Egypt, they remembered crops and bread. But they forgot that they also had toil and slavery and misery. Their current hunger – gave them *amnesia*.

How tempting it is to return to the place of the past – even if it represents torment – just because the KNOWN is safer than the unknown. The devil you know is better than the one you don't. Is this why the convict often returns to prison? Or the woman returns to the one who is beating her? Or we return to previous destructive thinking or behavior?

So, that's the first point to keep in mind: we can – like Israel – remember the past better than it was.

The second reason for Israel's despair was that they considered the present worse than it was. Sure they were hungry. They had been farmers – depending on the land to bring forth their food. Now, they were wandering Bedouins in a place inhospitable to planting crops or hunting game. Without food – no one could live. But Israel overestimated their difficulty. They forgot about the God who brought them out of Egypt in the first place. A God who could part the Sea;

overthrow a Pharaoh's army; and create a nation out of slaves - could provide food for them too. But their discomfort made them forgetful. And cranky. They began to say – “*is* God with us – or *not*?”

Things haven't changed that much. Does the present look bleak to you or me now? If so – let's try not to *repeat* Israel's mistake. The present doesn't speak for the future. The present doesn't exhaust the possibilities of God.

Might someone here be lonely; sick; discouraged with the family – or career? Maybe this present moment is “setting the stage” for God's greatest work – in my life or yours.

Such was the case with the children of Israel in the wilderness. God healed their temporary amnesia over Egypt pointing them again – to the future. And he healed their grumbling stomachs and grumbling hearts by producing food from a surprise source – manna every morning and fresh quail in the evening.

The message is: If God can produce food from thin air, He can provide everything else that's needed – whenever and however God wants to. And the lesson is: The journey with God goes forward into the future towards the Promised Land. Not backwards to Egypt.

So, it doesn't help remembering the past better than it was; and, we'll be better off not thinking the present is worse than it is. If God could – and did – do all that for Israel, don't you think He'll take care of us – also?

Every day in the “Our Father” we pray: “Give us THIS DAY our daily bread.” And Jesus says today: “Do not work for food that perishes.” We don't say: “Our Father, give us everything we need for tomorrow and the future.” But just give TODAY our daily strength!

That's exactly what God gave to the folks in the desert – manna – that couldn't be hoarded or preserved, but ***just enough*** to get through (to survive) for TODAY. “Tomorrow,” as Jesus says in another place, “will take care of itself.”