

I'M STUCK

March 11, 2018

Lent 4

[Numbers 21:4-9](#)

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

(prayer)

In the irreverent (but poignant and funny) Broadway Musical, [The Book Mormon](#), after arriving at his overseas mission field, young and eager “Elder Price” learns that none of his predecessors have managed to convince any of the locals to join the faith. As he sits dejected, he is given advice to help with how he is feeling:

<https://youtu.be/nTgQYWv0xi8> (00:08 - 01:52)

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Basic animal instinct has us react in three ways to stressful situations: fight, flight or freeze.

Generally...

- ~ we (either) face the stress head on, or
- ~ we distract ourselves (run away, turn it off), or
- ~ we shut down.

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Sometimes, these get ranked with the assumption is that *fighting* is the best response, *fleeing* is an okay response if one is realistic that the fight is unwinnable, but... *freezing* is assumed to be the least desirable response.

In fact, sometimes, we even ignore it as an option - thinking that we must choose between fight or flight.

If you have ever seen a winter hare’s reaction to a dog’s bark or caught a glimpse of a deer in the headlights, you know that freezing is a common first response.

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Freezing leaves us the most vulnerable.

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But typically *fight*, *flight* or *freeze* are our immediate reactions to the situation ~ we don’t take time to sit and think what an focus group might advice us... the stress shows up and we react immediately.

Our secondary reaction might be one of the others ... the rabbit will not sit there forever with its ears perked up if the dog moves in closer: then the chase is on.

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The initial response we choose might not always make the most sense in retrospect, but it is always authentic, in the moment.

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The Israelite Exodus after centuries of slavery at the hands of Egyptian overlords, solidified an identity among the Hebrews as a “liberated people”, as masters of their own destinies.

But the journey through the wilderness brought new challenges that made some of the people wonder if liberation was really all that great, after all.

After they ventured beyond Mount Horeb (Sinai), fresh water was not always easy to find. Even though, the people continued be nourished by morning manna and evening quails, they lamented the

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lack of variety: *Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.*

To make things worse (on the part of their journey we read about this morning), they came upon a part of the wilderness that was infested with deadly poisonous snakes.

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The story from Numbers 21 is similar to a *number* of other accounts about the exodus journey.

~ the people are pleased with their freedom; but

~ then the realities of wilderness living cause stress (lack of water, lack of food, Moses gone up the mountain for too long, dangerous animals); so

~ the people murmur amongst themselves and eventually grumble to Moses, who throws up his hands and asks God, what am I do with these *stiff-necked people*;

~ in real time (or in retrospect), the people's grumbling is interpreted as a lack of faith (or *sin*); even so

~ God instructs Moses how to meet the people's needs (water from a rock, bread from heaven, golden calf replaced with ten commandments, a miraculous healing snake totem); and

~ the people are (again) pleased with their freedom... for a while, at least.

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These *murmuring stories* serve as metaphors for the bigger story of God's graceful nature.

- God's creation is set up so that we are given the opportunity to freely make choices on how we will live;
- We realize (and are sometimes surprised) that part of this liberation means that we will find ourselves in challenging situations;
- In times of anxiety, we can become insular - only able to see our problem of the moment - we might lament the gift of free will, or we might blame God for not caring or not intervening: with our faith-ego bruised, we might even give up on God;
- Even if the divine ego is bruised, God does not abandon us... remaining in our midst, patiently waiting for us to find the way forward.

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The gracious nature of God - shown over and over again in the book of Numbers - is highlighted in the New Testament as well, as we heard in the letter to the Ephesians today:

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works.

(Eph2:4-9)

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The promise and hope of grace is not always easy to appreciate when we are in our most anxious moment.

To put it in the language of the Numbers story: it can be hard to believe in grace when the snakes are biting.

And yet... what I see (and know) about God's Grace from the scriptures is... that God knows that our faithfulness can (and does) come to a screeching halt from time to time.

We freeze. We get stuck.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

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Getting stuck is one of the worst feelings imaginable - longing to move forward, to fix or avoid things, but we are not able to leave the moment we are in.

It is lonely.

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The good news is that God is not only gracious, but also patient.

I believe that when we get stuck, God does not move on without us. **God sticks with us when we get stuck.**

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The [United Church Creed](#) begins and ends with these words:

We are not alone, we live in God's world

*In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
Thanks be to God.*

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- Having faith does not immune us from getting stuck.
- What does companionship in *stuck times* do for us?
 - Some can *Turn It Off*, but usually, need to repair the stress, not the stuck.
 - Forcing a solution is seldom helpful.
 - Being stuck is *okay*. It is a natural reaction, until we are ready to fight (fix the stress) or flee (remove ourselves from the stress).
- Is God really with us if we can't feel it (tree falling in the forest)? Promise is yes. No matter how devastating and broken the situation, God works for wholeness, healing and redemption.
- Ephesians 2:9-10: our works don't earn God's love/liberation, that is a gift - even so, we are created for good works.
- We are the work of God. We are the holy companion for our stuck fellow travelers.
- Being stuck is bad enough; if we can avoid adding loneliness to the mix, we are better off. We are deeply vulnerable in those times.
- A ministry of presence is the start of healing.

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- When the time is right - when being stuck doesn't work any more - as companions of our stuck friends, we can be WD40 for Jesus.

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Let us pray:

God of the ages, when life gets hard, you do not abandon us. Your steadfast love endures. We long to hold out your life-giving love to the world. Amen

#460VU "All Who Hunger"

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg