

I used to wonder what it would be like to live at that time in the future when our sun begins to die. CS Lewis, in his children's book *The Magician's Nephew*, describes the dreadful land of Charn which has reached that stage.

Low down and near the horizon hung a great, red sun, far bigger than our sun. Digory felt at once that it was also older than ours: a sun near the end of its life, weary of looking down upon that world. To the left of the sun, and higher up, there was a single star, big and bright. Those were the only two things to be seen in the dark sky; they made a dismal group. And on the earth, in every direction, as far as the eye could reach, there spread a vast city in which there was no living thing to be seen. And all the temples, towers, palaces, pyramids, and bridges cast long, disastrous-looking shadows in the light of that withered sun. Once a great river had flowed through the city, but the water had long since vanished, and it was now only a wide ditch of grey dust.

To me, that is the image of the ultimate end. When your own planet has become dark and cold and dry because of the decline of its sun, what more can be done? I pondered that as a child and always came to the same practical conclusion: that is not my problem now.

So call me a Pollyanna, but I still think that's not our problem. The earth is in plenty of trouble, but the sun seems to be humming along fine, and the future is still open. It is not short and predetermined. And that is very important for us to remember as we live in the tragic gap between what is and what should be, as did the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness.

The story from Exodus today tells us that they had been in the wilderness for one month when they began to be nostalgic for Egypt, its fleshpots and abundant bread. Sure, they were slaves, and sure, they had been calling out and groaning nonstop for God to free them. But at least they knew that they would eat every day. Out in the wilderness they lacked the security of Egypt and had no concrete goal

toward which to chart their progress. Was the Promised Land just over the next hill? Or was it 40 years' travel away? Nobody knew, and meantime nobody was having fun either. When would it end? *Would* it end?

Our ancestors in the faith, who recorded these stories, gave us a tremendous gift by not whitewashing the image of the ex-slaves. They could have portrayed them as heroic and spirited and noble, uncomplainingly eating roots and berries while singing original praise songs, but they didn't. They admitted that the wanderers in the wilderness took precisely four weeks to start complaining, romanticized their past (fleshpots? really?), and impugned the motives of their leader who had not asked for this assignment. So we can feel not so bad about ourselves in this current wilderness of uncertainty, in which gun violence keeps escalating, a great world power shows itself incapable of addressing hurricane damage, and our political leaders seem to be functioning in an alternate reality. We know the past is past, and it wasn't always so good for everybody, but at least it is now a known quantity. Now we have come to a place for which our resources are inadequate, we don't know what to do, and God seems to have left us hanging. We live in a time of massive change, and we really have no clue about when we'll have a clue about it.

God's response to the Israelites is to send quails and manna, just enough every evening for the following day. So every day they eat enough to know they're not going to starve today, but since it goes bad if you try to keep it longer than a day, there's no sense in building storage cabinets or digging root cellars, which are things you do when your journey is over and you're settling down in one place. The manna

is just enough to allow them to travel for one more day—which is better than starving but not as desirable as arriving, knowing you're home, and coming to a resolution of all unresolved issues.

And that's where we are too. We cannot stop moving forward, because where we are is unacceptable and in some cases actively deteriorating. I am not even going to enumerate the unacceptable conditions; we could all do it in our sleep. We can't go back either, because the past isn't there any more. We have to move forward without knowing where the end point is or being able to measure our progress. But God hears our cries and provides us our daily bread also.

I subscribe to a weekly newsletter for directors of nonprofit organizations, by a director of a very small nonprofit in Seattle. Last week he posted some self-care tips, like you do in times of too many hurricanes and breathtaking incompetence by political leaders, and he did that because he was himself feeling overwhelmed. It was a predictable list, with entries like “donate to organizations on the ground” and “meditate” and “immerse yourself in nature,” all good things and they actually do work, too, to keep us going. But he also keeps it real, and I find that that helps even more. For instance, under the heading “spend more time with your family,” he wrote,

Last week, I went to a pumpkin patch with the kids. They happily played in a giant bin full of dried corn. Then we saw a whole bunch of tiny black dots on the surface of the corn. They were grain beetles. Thousands of them. We quickly got the kids out and shook the beetles out of their socks. Wonderful memories like this should be cherished. Find time to hang out with your family.

It reminds me of a time in my daughter's long, anguished adolescence when she

pointed out the five hundredth way in which our family was failing to meet expectations, and I, thinking that a good mother would not challenge or invalidate her perceptions, could only suggest that when she grew up she could write memoirs like David Sedaris about her family *and she felt better!* It worked! The enticing prospect of making a living by making fun of her family was a great comfort to her.

What I am getting at is that our own goofiness is a feature, not a bug. It is intrinsic to the journey through the wilderness. It's manna. It helps us survive. Okay, here's a more pointed, or more clear, example.

On Tuesday our own MMS posted this on Facebook: "Called my boy Omar again at Joni Ernst's office. Wish we could talk under better circumstances, my dude, when I'm not requesting that you go and yell at your boss." From which I deduce that M is fighting the good fight against gun violence, although it could also have been the Republican tax plan or climate change. And I deduce further that M has called often enough that she knows the guy who answers the phone. So then her friend responds, "Omar! He's so friendly!" And M responds to her, "Yeah Omar is the best. I kept apologizing to him today. I was like, "It's not fair that you have to get yelled at because she isn't doing her job." But he was still just so nice ;\_\_\_;" What our girl has done is subvert the oppositional template of constituent complaint so that it is an occasion for humor and relationship. Calling your senator is not supposed to be fun or funny. But she is a young woman with a finely honed sense of the absurd, and she likes to highlight it when others of us might not even notice it. She has taken the "dead" out of "dead earnest." And honest to God, she is not making this up. I am sure there *is* a guy named Omar, and he *is* really nice, and it's

just like her to sort of wring a human connection out of this civic duty chore of calling our dreadful senator.

The journey through the wilderness is serious, for sure, but the Bible shows us what a bunch of clowns took that journey: people who got nostalgic for *slavery*. People who lasted *one month* before forgetting the parting of the Red Sea and all the impressive plagues that had contributed to their liberation. People who called their food “manna,” which means “what is it?” I find that the ancient Hebrew sense of humor is a little more elusive than that of, say, David Sedaris, but I do think it’s there. And as much as God gave daily manna to the children of Israel to keep them going in the wilderness, God gives us children, small animals, and our own goofy selves to keep *us* going in our grim wilderness.

There is no doubt that someday our sun will begin to die; it will turn redder and give less heat to the Earth, and things will change. In the nearer term, there are already pretty alarming hazards and disasters to cope with. But no matter how concerned we are about them, we can act only one day at a time. Our own journey is still just one day at a time. That’s just the scale on which we operate as human beings, carbon-based life forms, and it is at that scale that God is sustaining us so that on the grander scale we will eventually get to the Promised Land.

Let us pray.

Despite your people’s fickle hearts you gave them manna when they were hungry. Strengthen our hearts, and help us not take ourselves so seriously that we cannot be nourished by laughter. We count on you, God, to get us to the Promised Land.

Amen.

