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Sermon 13 June 2021

Title: Food for Thought 2 (Craving the Past)

- Good morning church—it is wonderful to be with you and we are so glad that you have joined LargsNaz online this morning—for those of you who may be watching during our Sunday brunch, we appreciate your support and hope that you are enjoying that immersive dining experience—be sure to take a couple of these handy-dandy “Food for Thought” coasters with you when you leave this morning
- This is the second Sunday in our current sermon series, entitled “Food for Thought,” and in which we are examining and learning from scriptures from the Old and New Testaments where food plays a particularly important role. Last Sunday we began at the beginning, all the way back to the garden of Eden, and we looked at what happens in Genesis Chapter 3, sometimes referred to as the Fall—when Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation to consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, and reach out and grab that forbidden fruit. The title of last week’s sermon was “No Substitutions” because we suggested that what Adam and Eve had done was to take a look at the menu that God provided them with, and to say that it wasn’t good enough—that they wanted something else—a substitution—something that wasn’t on the menu, and something that God had told them they shouldn’t have. And we saw that even after Adam and Eve had broken their relationships with God, with creation and with each other, throughout the Biblical narrative God, time and time again, reaches out to humanity offering redemption and reconciliation and liberation —but time and time again His people do not accept his provision, or find fault with what is provided and want something else—

and that is certainly the case in the scripture that we're looking at today, the 11th chapter of Numbers.

- In the passage that Pastor Tasha read for us, the children of Israel, the Hebrew people, have been dramatically and miraculously freed from their bondage in Egypt—they crossed the Red Sea on dry land and then Pharaoh's army got drowned as we mentioned in our Easter service—these are the events that are commemorated and remembered at Passover celebrations all over the world even to this very day-- and these people are on their way then, to the promised land—the land God has prepared for them—a land flowing with milk and honey. The Book of Numbers begins with the people of Israel having received the Law—the commandments-- at Mount Sinai—and then the people of the 12 tribes are counted (the Book of Numbers, you see)—and they begin their journey to take possession of the land that has been promised to them. But on the way, things get a little uncomfortable, and folks start to murmur and complain—and they keep murmuring and complaining for pretty much the entire book. Even though God has miraculously and powerfully liberated them from bondage and protected them and provided for them in the harsh wilderness, fed them with manna from heaven even, they are not content.
- And the reason that they are discontented and grumbling in the scriptures we're looking at today has to do with the fact that, like Adam and Eve last week, they want something that they haven't got—they want something that they can't get out in the middle of the desert.
- Our scripture today involves craving—and today's story begins when in verse 4 we read that the rabble had a strong craving, and they let other folks know about it—but it wasn't just the rabble, that mixed crowd of workers and folks who had accompanied the

Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt, who were complaining—verse 4 tells us that “the Israelites wept again.” It says “again” because verses 1-3 have also told us about the people’s complaining—remember, they do a lot of complaining and moaning and critiquing all through the book of Numbers—and back in verses 1-3 we’re told that their complaints make God so angry that he burns down part of their camp and they named the place where the fire happened “Taberah,” which means “Burning.”

- Now, verses 1 through 3 tell us that the people were complaining because of their misfortunes—and that’s all the information we’re given—we’re not told specifically what those misfortunes were, we’re only told that the people complained about them-- but now here in verse 4 the people—some of them anyway—are weeping and wailing because of a specific malady—they are complaining because they have a strong craving. In medicine we might say that this is their “chief complaint,” a strong craving.
- In the medical field we often see patients who are experiencing strong cravings for one thing or another--Sometimes a craving can be a sign or a symptom of an underlying medical condition—back in Charleston we used to see female patients who reported craving corn starch—what we call “corn flour” here in the UK—they’d eat it straight out of the box--and more often than not, that would be a signal that they were anemic and their iron was low—
- it also makes sense that people would crave foods that have vitamins in them that they might be deficient in—and so sometimes a craving is a way of providing our bodies with some element that we need—but people also crave things that are not good for them—
- When a person has created a dependency or an addiction to something—like alcohol or cigarettes or a drug like heroin—they’ll crave that substance just to keep their body working normally and not feeling bad—part of that is due to the fact that the microbes

in our guts control the release of chemicals that make us feel good or bad—and those chemicals can make us feel very good—or very bad—in fact the cravings that accompany withdrawal from addictive substances can be almost unbearable—not just uncomfortable and powerful but even painful—cravings can make us physically hurt

- There's a suffix—a part of a word-- that we use in medical terminology to refer to pain—and it's "*algia*" --so we might talk about "neuralgia"—that's nerve pain—or myalgia—that's muscle pain—or arthralgia—that's joint pain
- We find that *-algia* suffix in the word "nostalgia." Nostalgia of course is the feeling we feel when we yearn for a time that has passed, for the places and the people in our memories—places and people and things that we don't have access to in our present, but that we can remember and long for—the first part of the word "nostalgia" is "nostos" and it's a Greek word that means "homecoming" or "returning home," and so nostalgia is the pain that we feel when we get "homesick."
- Pastor Tasha and I have certainly been homesick, for our families, for the places and people back in South Carolina a few times over the past year—and we couldn't remedy that homesickness because we were not allowed to travel—I'm sure that this past year has made us all nostalgic for a world without the pandemic and its restrictions—we remember the way things used to be and yearn for them to be that way again—just to be normal—we often hear folks asking "when will things return to normal—to the way they used to be?" And we work toward making that happen.
- Reminiscing about past times, both happy and sad, can be therapeutic--a certain kind of nostalgia can help drive us toward making the present and the future better, but another kind of nostalgia that becomes fixated on the past can be damaging and can

even prevent us from seeing better days—because the past is a nice place to visit, but you don't want to live there. In fact, you can't live there.

- I refer to nostalgia here because I want us to consider for a little while what happens in Chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers, where we read about these folks who have a strong craving—and both times this “craving” is mentioned—in verse 4 and later in verse 34, the writer does not specify WHAT the object of their craving is—the writer doesn't tell us WHAT they're craving-- and I want to suggest this morning that the craving that these folks are experiencing is twofold—that it is not simply a craving for a specific food to eat—it's not only a craving for meat, it's also a craving for the past— and their cravings are a symptom of an underlying condition, and that condition is a pathological nostalgia—an unhealthy and unhelpful relationship with the past
- Let's look at what the people say as they are weeping in verses 4 and 5—there we read: 4 The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember. . .” and there, I believe, is the heart of the message here in this chapter--—a dangerous and damaging craving for the past—a pathological nostalgia
- I'd like to walk through what happens here in this chapter because I believe that just as we saw last week when we looked at the story of Adam and Even in the garden, here we find another ancient story—from thousands of years ago—that has meaning and relevance and a message for us this morning in 2021.
- I want to suggest 3 points about this pathological nostalgia and the damage that this condition can cause—because its prognosis is grave--I want to consider 3 effects of this condition that we see exhibited in some of the people who accompany Moses in the wilderness—because I believe that there is a warning and a challenge for us here

today—I believe that there is an admonition here to avoid a certain way of thinking and behaving and believing—an admonition to avoid craving the past—to avoid becoming infected with pathological nostalgia.

- The first effect of pathological nostalgia, of craving the past, is this—pathological nostalgia distorts our retrospective vision—it prevents us from seeing the past clearly—it affects our memories
- Let's look at our scripture: beginning with verse 4: 4 The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6 but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'
- Let's hear verse 5 again: 5 We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic;
- We used to eat those fish for nothing—didn't have to do a thing for them, just ate them—and oh the cucumbers and melons—refreshments that cool you off when you're feeling the heat—and the leeks and onions and garlic—all those flavourful things we used to cook with as we just lounged around in the sand under the bright Middle Eastern sun--That sounds like quite a picnic, doesn't it?
- Now remember that back in Egypt these people were enslaved, dehumanised, working in the stifling desert heat making bricks and whatnot-- feeling the sting of the slavemaster's whip—and there are a lot of ways to describe what these people had experienced back in Egypt—servitude, bondage, oppression, exploitation, torture, desperation, hopelessness, but one thing is for certain and that is that it was no picnic.

- But this is the way that they are remembering it—they are longing for a past that didn't even exist in the first place. They have idealised it and romanticised it—removed any trace of unpleasantness—and every culture is prone to this temptation when times are difficult—nostalgia can be a powerful coping mechanism-- and what is happening here in the Book of Numbers is that these folks are trying to cope with their situation by themselves rather than relying on God and of course they are going to fail—
- When they think “I wish we had some meat” what they ought to do is look to the future that God calls them to—to what WILL be and to work toward it—but instead they look to the present and what they don't have and to the past—to a past that never even happened
- When you mis-remember the past, when you re-write history, you can't learn from it, so you're doomed to repeat it, and not only that, but by re-writing the past in this way, these folks have emptied it of its meaning—they have robbed God of the credit He deserves for setting them free from oppression by denying that the work God did was necessary—because liberation is pointless if there was no reason to want to be liberated
- Imagine if someone told you about how they became a Christian and they said, “Well, before I became a Christian, things were really great—I had it so easy—I could do whatever I wanted—I made all my own decisions—made my own rules—went wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, with whoever I wanted and did whatever I wanted, oh it was a picnic, but now life is hard—it's a lot of work—just drudgery really”—you wouldn't be interested in hearing any more about the gospel—about the good news, because that doesn't sound like good news at all—
- But that's not the way we talk about life before we met Jesus—we have a clear and accurate understanding of the situation and so we say things like “once I was bound by

sin's galling fetters--Chained like a slave I struggled in vain, But i received a glorious freedom, When Jesus broke my fetters in twain--Glorious freedom, wonderful freedom-- No more in chains of sin I repine-- Jesus the glorious Emancipator--Now and forever--He shall be mine”

- We have to be honest about the past if we are to proclaim the gospel that sets the captive free—we’ve got to be accurate about God’s work in the past if we are going to participate in the present and the future in which God is at work
- I’ve heard some folks idealise the pre-pandemic world, too, you know—especially some church folks—over the last year it’s been tempting to think about the way things were before COVID and to say, “Oh before this virus and all these restrictions—everybody was so happy—we could go to restaurants anytime we wanted and travel wherever we wanted to—and everybody was able to come to church—we could pack as many people as we wanted into our sanctuaries—they were just bursting at the seams”—but in fact the truth is that before the pandemic, 93% of the population had no interest in attending a church service or hearing about the things of God at all and in general Christianity was in decline— The pandemic did not break into some golden age of Christianity in this country, it broke into a Christianity in ruins, let’s just be honest---and that is not a past that we need to get back to, it’s a past from which we have been delivered and if we get fixated on returning to some normal past we run the risk of missing the work God is doing in the miraculous present and in the promising future— we should also remember that the state of “Christianity” is not necessarily the state of the Kingdom of God
- Ecclesiastes 7:10 reminds us: Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.—The Message translation puts that

like this: Don't always be asking, "Where are the good old days?" Wise folks don't ask questions like that. Why don't wise folks ask questions like that? Because wise folks know that the same God who was at work yesterday is still at work today and will still be at work tomorrow—

- In the wilderness the people cry "oh, remember when we had meat—now all we have is this manna to look at—and our strength is gone"—well that's because they weren't supposed to just look at the manna, they were supposed to eat it—because it would give them strength—and because they are fixated on the past, because they have been infected with pathological nostalgia, they don't even appreciate what a miracle it is that they are in the wilderness and God is providing them each and every day with food from heaven--the people are too concerned with what they don't have to see how truly astonishing what they do have—and what God is doing—is
- And they're not just missing what's happening in the present, they are also, and this is my second point, they are also hindering the progress of God's people in the present—they are standing in the way of the advancement of the people—and standing in the way of the movement of the Kingdom is not a place you want to be.
- Because they are weeping and complaining—at the entrances of their tents, verse 10 tells us—that is, so that they could be heard—the Lord becomes angry, and Moses is not happy about this—and so Moses has to have a little conference with the Lord—and what Moses says to God reveals how the people have affected his mental state—he has become distracted by their craving and complaining—when his mind and his spirit should be concerned with getting six hundred thousand people to the promised land, he's thinking about where he's supposed to find meat out in the middle of the desert—and Moses asks God why He's treating him so badly—he basically says "these people

aren't my children—I didn't give birth to them—how am I supposed to feed them meat? If this is what you expect of me, then have mercy and just kill me now" –that's literally what verse 15 says: If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—the people's pathological nostalgia has Moses himself longing for death and saying "these people are too heavy for me."

- So God decides to lighten his load. And there are a lot of details about how that happens in verses 16 through 30, about the seventy elders and the two prophets who were in the camp—likely warning folks about what was happening—but the short version is that God says "because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"—that is, because you are exhibiting the signs of pathological nostalgia and saying you want meat to eat—well, you're gonna get meat—not just a day's worth or a week's worth, but you're going to get so much meat it'll be coming out of your noses—that's literally what verse 20 says—
- And all of this planning and execution of a response to the people's complaining is a distraction from the mission that is supposed to be happening—and that's moving the people of God toward the promised land—but pathological nostalgia hinders the present work of the people of God—that's still as true today as it ever was
- And so--pathological nostalgia distorts our retrospective vision—it prevents us from seeing the past clearly—and secondly pathological nostalgia hinders the progress of God's people in the present—and finally, our third point, pathological nostalgia precludes participation in the promises of the future
- That brings us to the end of the story here in Numbers—God has said "tell the people they're getting meat, and plenty of it," and God causes a wind to blow quail all around the camp—about three feet deep—that's a lot of quail—and the people gather them up

but while the meat is still between their teeth, verse 33 tells us, God sends a plague that kills those who had the craving—we know that’s who it killed because verse 34 tells us they called the place where they were Kibroth-hattaavah—that is, Graves of craving—because that’s where they buried the people who had the craving.

- So it turns out that pathological nostalgia is fatal, and has a mortality rate of 100%.
- And once those victims are buried in the Graves of Craving, the rest of the people, unsurprisingly, move on. They have a destination—they have a mission—they have a promised land to inherit—a future to inhabit—but that is a future that would not be inhabited by those who craved the past—who were fixated on a fictional history that they longed to return to, those who hindered the progress of the people of God
- This is a hard truth for us this morning, but I believe the message of Numbers 11 is a truth we need to be reminded of—because the past can be commemorated, even celebrated, but it must not be perpetuated when God is calling us to a future that He has provided-- I’m reminded of the words of a song that says “those days are past now, and in the past they must remain—but we can still rise now”—maybe you’ve heard that song as well
- As we continue to navigate through this pandemic wilderness let’s not yield to the temptation to crave the past, let’s appreciate and praise God for the miraculous provision He makes for us in the present, and let’s hold fast to the promises that are still to come—let’s progress into the unknown with the full confidence that what God has in store for us is more than we could ask or even imagine
- Let us affirm the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3 this morning: One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal. . .

- I'm glad today to be part of a church that isn't pining for the past—a church that is active in the present, a church that looks forward to the future—a church that is witnessing daily God's manna from heaven in the here and now and stands ready to move ahead as the Spirit leads us toward the Promised Land—and I hope you'll come with us