

**Sermon Preached by Rabbi Aaron Bisno, Rabbi-in-Residence
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B
March 10, 2024**

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21.

Are we there yet? How much longer? The voices we recognize come from the back of the family car on what would have otherwise been a very pleasant road trip or Saturday, Sunday afternoon drive. Parents in the front, children in the back, and that incessant demand to let everyone know that those who know the least have incredibly high expectations. Things should be moving faster. We should be closer by now. I'm getting bored and I'm growing frustrated. Things are not at all to my liking. And were it up to me, you should know things would be different around here. If only I were in charge. If only I were in control. If only everyone else recognized what I see so clearly. We would be there already.

Here's the scene as shared from the book of Numbers just moments ago. For Mount Hor, the Israelites set out by way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became impatient along the way. Even after God had delivered these former slaves from their Egyptian bondage, even after God had walked them through the Red Sea, drawing their enemies into the water behind them, there to be drowned, even after God had fed the Israelites with food that fell from heaven and was now taking them the final leg of the journey towards freedom, even then the Israelites grew impatient, they grumbled and complained, "You can hear them now, are we there yet?"

Significantly the Hebrew tells us that these cries of the Israelites were as a result of their coming to be "ketzer nefesh," which is to say they were dispirited, discouraged in soul. The phrase evokes a number of metaphors, a constriction of belief, a darkening of spirit, a sense of being dissatisfied, rested, impatient, implacable. To be "ketzer nefesh" is to be distressed, it is to be dis-eased, and decidedly dissatisfied with the circumstances and the experiences one is having at present. So why were these former Israelite slaves so impatient and so unhappy upon the way? Simply because they felt that the life God had promised them, the kind of life they really wanted and were convinced they deserved, this reality wasn't coming fast enough. The path they were on, the course their life was taking, was to their mind longer and harder and more painful than they had ever expected. The Israelites were ketzer nephesh as a result. They were restive and impatient because there was so much that was beyond their control and they resented it. Those former slaves were ketser nephesh. They were impatient because at bottom they had lost their faith.

You see, impatience is not just a lack of patience. Impatience is a loss of faith. It is, of course, an amalgam of anxiety and often anger and fear, but impatience is essentially a loss of faith in the order of things. Or in the words of Bethlehem College and Seminary Chancellor John Piper, "Impatience is a form of unbelief." Impatience is what we begin to feel when we start to doubt the wisdom of God's timing or the goodness of God's guidance. Impatience or becoming in Hebrew, ketser nefesh, springs up in our hearts when our plans or our expectations are interrupted or shattered and may be prompted by something as insignificant as getting into the wrong lane at the checkout at the grocery, being behind someone slower than you would like them to be driving in traffic or may come as a result of a sudden blow that knocks out half of our dreams. Impatience is frustration and fear, but most of all, impatience is a loss of faith. And in 2024, we know something about this. Indeed, you and I live now in an age when we might come to expect everything and expect it yesterday.

When, with one click, we can get virtually anything delivered to our door within hours, when streaming services provide all of our media at any time and on demand, we live in a generation in which we can each create and fashion an individual world all of our own. And we can do it DIY, we do it ourselves, customizing our experiences such that we might even have come to reasonably expect that the entire world will shift and move to our pace and in keeping with our respective preferences. Is it any wonder then that the character exhibited in the desert by the Israelites is our current experience as well? We of little faith.

The people grew impatient, we read in the book of Numbers, to which we might understandably reply, "I hear you. Join the club. Get in line." Now, impatience can mean a lot of different things to different people. I recall that when I was younger, I was often impatient, eager to see change happen in my life and in my workplace. I believed then that impatience was a sign of my passion and my eagerness at efforts at doing things quickly or moving things along already. I believe this characteristic belied my ambition. And the fact that I felt I understood the world around me more quickly than others only made me more eager to act on my own beliefs and only contributed to my looking at patience as the surest way to fall behind. In essence, I took the admonition offered by Rabbi Hillel in the first century, if not now, when, to be an encouraging sign justifying my impatience as the sign of the rightness of my own ideas and of the relevance of my personal timetable.

But the truth is, while impatience can seem like the fire that hastens the change we have been waiting for, in truth, the cries, "Are we there yet? How much longer?" And our belief that we or I know best, these are signs that our complaint is not with the journey but is with the journeyman. Having centered ourselves within our own story, when we are impatient, our issue is not with others per se. Ours is a reflection of our own personal pride and preferences. Christian theologian Tim Keller teaches that the Bible says pride is a concentration of the self, to which theologian and author C.S. Lewis adds, pride is a ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration on self. And we know, you and I, from our own experiences, that elevating oneself is implicitly and necessarily a diminishment of others, and that that is a distancing of ourselves from God. To be impatient as were the Israelites on their journey is to be frustrated with where God has placed us and with the pace of the unfolding of our lives. This type of impatience is a loss of faith, specifically because impatience is pride.

And while ambition and the pride that animates impatience may appear to be a virtue, in truth pride is nothing less than vanity. And impatience is pride's symptom, for impatience is a claim that I deserve more, that I deserve better, that I know best. In essence, where impatience is a centering of self, the opposite of impatience is a deepening acceptance and a peaceful willingness to wait for God's plan to unfold in the unplanned place in which we find ourselves, and it is to travel with God at the unplanned pace of a journey that is more God's than our own. And to be other than *ketser nefesh*, to be other than impatient, is to grow and to travel at God's pace and to be trusting that God is right here, in this place.

And so let us return to those impatient Israelites who, like the children in the back of the family car, plaintively pleading for us to be there already and are also adieu about what isn't happening for them, who are all out of sorts for the pace at which life is not unfolding and the place at which they now find themselves. So we know something about being impatient, about being *ketser nefesh*, and we know something about wanting what we want now, yet not having it in hand. After all, we're human. There is an old Jewish legend that is told about a man named Yaakov. Yaakov lived in Krakow, Poland. One night, frustrated and impatient with his life, Yaakov, tossing and turning, has a dream. And in this dream, he foresees a treasure, a buried treasure, that awaits him beneath a bridge in a faraway city. And so, when Yaakov awakes, convinced that his fortune and his future awaits him elsewhere, he sets off in search of the purpose of his life. He bids his family

farewell and seeks to find his fortune to quicken the arrival of his future. Yaakov journeys some distance from Krakow and finds there the city and the bridge that he had imagined only a few nights before. And there he begins to dig. He continues digging for hours or perhaps some say it was days. And then a man chances upon Yaakov and asks what he is doing. Yaakov explains his quest to which the local man laughs and recounts his own dream, this one about a Jew named Yaakov who lives in Krakow beneath whose floorboards in his kitchen lives a buried fortune. At that very moment Yaakov turns to leave and heads back home. And upon his arrival in Krakow he enters his modest dwelling place, lifts up the floorboards in his kitchen and lo and behold his fortune. He discovers that which he had been seeking exactly where God had originally planted him. Not as Yaakov expected, but exactly as God had ordained and ordered.

And so may I suggest it is with you and me. There may be very little about life or our life's journey that we understand. There may be little about the pace of our lives and our place in the story that we would have predicted or might even like. And there is even less within our lives that we can control. And yet unbelief, to grow impatient and to lose one's faith, to be ketser nephesh, this is not only foolish pride, it is a choice. For when we center ourselves, our wants and our desires and our expectations, when we center our own person above trusting in the process, when we choose to elevate ourselves instead of accepting God's plan for our lives, when we hold tight instead of letting go and letting God, when we grow impatient and become ketser nephesh, we are doing no other than making of ourselves and our wishes an idol, so to assuage our fears, but in so doing, necessarily distancing ourselves from one another and in a very real way, distancing ourselves from God and the very life that is ours to lead. Impatience is easy. After all, we have our own ideas, we know our own thoughts.

Acceptance is harder, because we must acknowledge that we are not the one calling the shots, and we are not the one who is ultimately in control. And yet God is with us nonetheless. And so on our life's journey, rather than grow impatient as did the Israelites on theirs, rather than growing ketzer nephesh for all that is not ours, and all that is not yet, and rather than give up or grow past God's plan for us, far better would it be for us to recognize that while we resonate and recognize the child's impatient cry, "Are we there yet?" As children of God, the more appropriate question and answer is for us to see that God has placed us exactly where we are supposed to be, such that our future and our fortune await us here and now, and all shall be revealed to us in good time and at a pace and place of God's choosing. Amen.