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“Bitter”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Ash Wednesday

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Matthew 6:19:23; Psalm 13

Do you like the taste of rutabagas? Do you even know what they look like?

I didn't, until my husband picked one up and suggested
that I learn how to cook it.

It's round, about the size of a baseball, and oddly colored;

orangish-white with purple highlights;

a Virginia Tech hokie sort of vegetable.

How about turnips? Rutabagas taste kind of like turnips?

And collard greens or mustard greens?

Do you like the way they taste;

the way they smell when you cook them?

Being a year- round frequenter of the Durham Farmer's Market,

I've just about had my fill of these types of roots

and dark, leafy-greens over the winter.

I know they are good for us, and provide many beneficial

vitamins and minerals,

but we refer to all of the above at my house as as “stinky food”,

and we agree that “bitter”, as a taste, is an acquired taste,

something one does not come by naturally.

Already, I'm salivating for sweeter things to come

with spring on the horizon – like fresh green lettuce,

or fruits, like strawberries and blackberries.

Bitter is the taste of oppression, according to Scripture.

On the eve of their hasty deliverance from slavery in Egypt,

Israel is told to make her passover meal one of flatbread,
and bitter herbs, like endive, chickory and other bitter tasting plants
indigenous to the land of Egypt.

I bet if the exodus had taken place in North Carolina,

God would have instructed them to eat rutabagas and turnips,
collard greens and mustard greens, and possibly
a salad tossed together quickly with arugula.

Ooooh! All of those set my teeth on edge and make me long

for culinary deliverance from bitterness,

to something sweet....like milk and Honey-Nut Cheerios.

Bitter, in the Bible, is also the name that Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi,

gives herself when she returns to her hometown of Bethlehem

with no one else but her daughter-in-law, Ruth,

a Moabitess, a foreigner, a persona non grata,

and no sons or grandsons to favor her family name.

A series of unfortunate events have happened to Naomi,

so she declares to all her old friends and neighbors

that she has legally changed her name,

and that from this day forward

they should start calling her by her new name, "Mara" -

which in Hebrew means "bitter".

"Don't call me Naomi," she tells them, "call me Mara!

The Strong One has dealt me a bitter blow.

I left here full of life, and God has brought me back with nothing

but the clothes on my back.

Why would you call me Naomi?

The Strong One has ruined me." (*The Message*, Ruth 1: 20-21)
I have always been fascinated by this, because the root of my name,
Marilyn, and any of the many derivatives of the Hebrew word
Mara, like Mary, Mary Ann, Marie, Maria, Marian, or Maryn;
the root of our very common names, and the root of
the mother of Jesus' name, means "bitter".

Why would anyone name a baby, "Bitter"?

Is there something about human nature that makes us tend
towards bitterness, yet long for deliverance
to something sweeter?

Apparently so, according the Psalmist.

Psalm 13 begins with four angry questions addressed to the Strong One.

"How long, O Lord, will You forget me always?

How long will You hide your face from me?

How long will I have worries on my mind, and grief in my heart all day?

How long will my enemy have the upper hand over me?"

The "how long" questions are the most poignant and heart-wrenching
questions in Scripture, I think.

They are a cry of desperation from a person whose seems
plagued indefinitely by misfortune, by loss, by disfavor,
by calamity, by shame, by being counted as....nothing.

We do not know the cause of the psalmist's lament, but we could
posit several guesses:

perhaps she is has miscarried numerous pregnancies,
while others seem to have babies effortlessly - bitter;
perhaps he has been out of work so long that he is depressed,
and his marriage is unraveling - bitter;
perhaps she and her husband are disappointed that their child
did not make the scores and grades to qualify for an Ivy,

while others are flaunting their Ivy league acceptance letters - bitter;
perhaps he has discovered that his wife of all these years
has not been so faithful after all - bitter.

Times change, but human disappointments do not.

Nor does the tendency for them to leave a bitter taste
of resentment in our mouths.

The Psalmist is willing to lay the blame for the condition of his or her
distress at the feet of God, the Strong One, who is able to bear
the weight of our bitterness, and then some.

And, if God does not answer, respond, and rescue,
the Psalmist feels that he or she will surely die,
or shamefully succumb to the imagined shadenfreude
of the triumphant enemy.

But the Psalmist doesn't fall into this trap, you will notice;
doesn't isolate himself or herself in a psychological envy corner;
doesn't allow the two little words in v. 2, "forget" and "always"
to box him into a state of permanent, disabling bitterness.

The Psalmist speaks an affirmation of trust in God's kindness,
and an affirmation of God's reliability
for reaching down to rescue those who find themselves
fenced in, or fenced out, by misery.

The Psalmist no longer fears that God will forget him forever.

The words "forget" and "always" may find themselves occasionally
aligned in the same sentence,
but that does not mean they
will adhere to one another permanently in the Psalmist's future,
or in ours.

Friends, the season of Lent is upon us.

And Jesus, as he turns his face towards Jerusalem prepares to
surrender control of his future to his God.

We know the story, and the disappointments ahead for him on the road
to resurrection.

We know the suffering and darkness that Jesus will face and endure,
and the humiliation he will encounter as others gloat
over his apparent demise.

We know that bitterness could be his constant companion on the journey,
because after all, Jesus is fully human.

But he isn't bitter, is he?

Or if he is, he only expresses it to "my God, my God".

So, how does Jesus keep from falling into this trap of bitterness,
I want us to ask?

And how might we make a spiritual practice during this Lenten season,
of expressing the deep oscillations of our attitudes to God,
and then waiting and listening for God's life-changing response?

How might we think of prayer, itself, as a vehicle of our transformation,
as we regard how Jesus used prayer during his darkest times,
to allow the good light of God to turn his acute distress to
deepest trust?

I don't know about you, but I would like to give up "bitter" for Lent,
and turn it over to the Strong One, in hope of transformation.

And I would love to have you join me on this journey. Amen.