

September 20th, 2020

Exodus 16:2-15 “Bread in the Wilderness”

For Thursday night Bible Study we've been doing a survey of the Book of Exodus. We're moving through at a pretty good clip ... about 5 chapters per week. Sunday mornings, on the other hand, are more like a whirlwind tour of the highlights. If you want to know more about Exodus, come to Bible Study! If you're feeling lost, read the book. It's not boring. It's all about how the Nation of Israel came to be and how God went from being their Judge to being their King.

Last week, we passed through the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army hot on their heels. Things didn't end well for Pharaoh's army. So finally! The Children of Israel are out of slavery and on their way to the land that God promised Abraham generations before. They've still got a ways to go. In fact, they've got another 40 years of wandering before they come to this Promise Land. There's something about the wilderness and the number 40. In the New Testament, before Jesus started his public ministry, he was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted by the devil. Sometimes we talk about difficult seasons in our “times in the wilderness.” Most of the time, a “time in the wilderness” means times where it's been a struggle to survive. Or maybe it means a time in our lives where we've asked, “What is the purpose of my life?” or “Where is God in all of this?” Social psychologists refer to this time as “liminal space,” which means you're between one time and place and another. It's often an unsettling place where you've left something behind, but you're not sure what you're trying to find. It's a place of wandering, wondering, and waiting.

There are a bunch of ways that we can find ourselves out in the wilderness of “liminal space.” Sometimes unforeseen circumstances or emergencies are what drive us there. Sometimes we willingly flee there, or maybe even stumble there. We can venture there to deliberately look for answers or even come up with the questions to help find the answers. In many traditional cultures, young men and sometimes young women

were required to venture into the wilderness as a rite of passage into adulthood where they can find their truth before they were allowed to return and be welcomed back as adults. Some folks say that we don't have enough of these "required" rites of passage into adulthood anymore, but I know a lot of young people who often take literal wilderness experiences like hiking the Pacific Crest Trail or going on a white water rafting trip or going into the Peace Corps to mark that passage between childhood and adulthood with all its responsibilities.

In the case of the people of Israel in our scripture, they escaped into the wilderness with God's help. They were fleeing from slavery and oppression on the hopes of a new homeland that was promised to their ancestors. I've been thinking about all the fires on the West Coast this year that have destroyed communities like Berry Creek here in this area, as well as Talent and Phoenix up in Oregon. This on top of the devastating Camp Fire at the end of 2018. It reminds me that a lot of folks find themselves in the wilderness unwillingly. These folks didn't venture out in hope. They weren't fleeing some terrible past. In fact, for a lot of these folks, the past was comfortable and secure. They had no desire to leave. But the fires changed everything. The old life is gone and can never be recovered. Maybe there's brighter days ahead, but for a lot of folks, they can't even imagine those days. There were definitely people among the Israelites wandering in the wilderness who could only see the bare, inhospitable desert they were trudging through. As strange as it sounds, the only thing that they can call to mind is the reality they left behind as slaves in Egypt, and that it was looking a whole lot better than the reality they were in now. "If only we were back in Egypt where our slave drivers at least made sure we were fed."

But there is no going back. And that's the reality of these liminal experiences we have. We can't break away from our connection with what we left behind. The young adult can't return to being a child. People who grieve can't resurrect their loved ones. The community can't return to the innocence it enjoyed before the disaster that shattered their reality. If there's a way out of the wilderness, if there's a way to

pass through to the other side, the only way we can go is forward, not back.

So even though we might want to go back to what we had ... even though we may even entertain fantasies that we can ... the *real* question is: “How do we survive in the wilderness now until we find a way to break through to the other side?” The wilderness, by definition, seems harsh and inhospitable. It feels unsafe, and barren, and devoid of the necessities of life. And to make matters worse, we sometimes find ourselves at odds with others who are on the same journey during the early stages of the wilderness experience. Think about how we’re responding to this pandemic! You’ve got some people who want to reject the idea of wearing a mask for a variety of reasons. Some people think it’s the only way to get back to normal. And no matter on which side of the issue we are, we’re upset and disgusted with the powers that be, even more than the virus itself! Some of the Israelites in the Sinai desert started to grumble against Moses and Aaron. They went as far as to blame them for the whole ordeal. But there were also others who were ready to push forward right away. And here’s the thing – Nobody was necessarily right or wrong. They were just dealing with their wilderness experience differently.

This is true in any wilderness experience where two or more are gathered. The reality is that the person sitting next to you probably sees our present situation very differently from you. Some think we’re moving too fast. Some people think we’re moving too slow. Some think they can already see the Promised Land, but the thing is there are *others* who think they can see the Promised Land too but they’re not looking in the same direction. This can happen even when you’re in your own personal wilderness. One part of you is going this way, and another part of you is going that way. Different feelings and perspectives come into conflict even within you. Even if I want to try to flee my own personal wilderness, I can’t even achieve a consensus within myself about which way to go!

So the question we have on the table this morning is, “How does one survive in the wilderness? And where is God?” Here’s the paradox though – God is often most clearly and strongly with us in our wilderness experiences, but it’s usually only later, when we are out of the wilderness, that we recognize this. The liminal experience of being in the realm of in between is actually one that breaks down our defenses and makes us more open to God. We just can’t always see it when we’re in the middle of it. So let’s see if we can find some clues about how to survive our own wilderness experiences by looking to the children of Israel’s wilderness experience

As harsh as their experience of slavery had been, they tended to associate the presence of God with the wealth and power of Egypt. When the king is on his throne and everything is carefully ordered and under control, we imagine we are seeing the blessings of God. If the king is in control that must mean God is in control. And yet the Exodus story calls us to recognize that God is the one who can and will overthrow earthly kingdoms! But it’s also God who will feed us even in the wilderness. The wilderness can’t destroy us, because God is there.

The wilderness place isn’t where we’re going to starve because God is there and God will provide. The wilderness place may well deprive us of things we *thought* we needed to survive, but God is there and will provide us with what we *really* need. God will reform us and reshape us in the wilderness. God will prepare us for the new life that lies ahead of us. To a people who thought they were about to starve in the wilderness, God provided quail at night, and manna bread in the morning. It sure isn’t what they expected! In fact the word “manna” comes from Hebrew word that means, “What is this?” The bread God provided from heaven was not anything they recognized or anticipated, but it was what they needed and it was God’s gracious gift in their time of need. And this bread taught them new lessons about surviving in the wilderness. It taught them that they could not prosper by hoarding. If they collected more than a day’s worth of manna, it went bad. Sort of

reminiscent of Jesus' prayer when he says, "Give us *this* day our daily bread."

Wealth is kind of like that. It's unstable if you hoard it. It's like blood or water. If it keeps moving it stays healthy, but if it banks up in one spot it goes stagnant and poisons us. In the wilderness we learn to rely on God one day at a time, and to make sure that everyone is receiving their share. Here at the table where we gather every week, we receive the bread of Christ. The early Christians frequently drew on the image of the manna in the wilderness when describing communion. We may look here and think "what is this?" We may not recognize it as anything that can sustain us in the wilderness. But here is bread and wine and a body gathered around the table, and here is God meeting us and offering himself to us as the bread of heaven to sustain us in the wilderness. Whatever your wilderness is; whatever your response to the wilderness is, God is here. God knows your need. God will be with you. God will feed you and see you through. You won't be the same when you emerge. We are all changed in the wilderness, but if we will feed on the gifts of God and respond to the call of God, we will be changed for the better. Why? Because God is God, and the wilderness is God's home. Blessed be God for ever.