

“Getting Through the Wilderness”
March 6, 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

Two years ago, on Sunday, March 8, during the announcements I said: “The latest uncertainty in these uncertain times is the Coronavirus and its spread in the United States...Right now, we simply want to be prepared as best we can if conditions get worse. So, for a while, as of this morning, we will discourage shaking hands during the time of greeting and downstairs with greeters beforehand and with me after worship. It’s a rapidly changing situation and we’ll keep up to date and keep you up to date as well.”

Discouraging hand shaking.

As it turned out, the situation required much more from us and all the world.

The following Sunday we cancelled in person worship and then moved online, coming back together after a year and a half, pausing that in January, and as of last month back together again. It has been in many ways a *sacred* journey as we have moved through the past two years together—filled with sadness and anger and fear and, yes, at times laughter. We keep moving toward something like “normal.” And our strength comes as we do all of this *together*. We have learned in new ways just how much we need one another.

I was thinking about all of this as I read those words of Moses from Deuteronomy that we heard this morning: “Celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given you.”

This is a traditional text for the beginning of Lent, but it also seems like a strange text for the beginning of Lent. It speaks of the end of the journey, of coming *out* of the wilderness into a land of milk and honey, of feasting and celebrating and sharing. It sounds more like Mardi Gras than Ash Wednesday.

It sounds a little more like where we are than where we have been: coming out on the other side, getting through the wilderness.

This account from Deuteronomy is a story from a time when everything has worked out. And yet I think we are well aware that, even with rapidly declining Covid cases, we are hardly in a time in which things are working out.

The speech of Moses invites us to stand on the bank of the Jordan River with the Hebrew people. They had been slaves in Egypt. They were led out by “a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders.” They were chased by Egyptians on chariots. They were hungry and God provided food. They were thirsty and water came from a rock. They were disobedient and plagued by serpents. They repented and God restored them.

And now they stand waiting to enter the Promised Land. But they are not there yet.

We stand with them in memory and hope.

In many ways, we find ourselves still in the desert places of life and facing our own trials and temptations. As one person put it, “No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.” (Evelyn Underhill)

The wilderness, of course, can be found just about anywhere—at home, at work, in this city.

It is in the wilderness that we learn about faithfulness.

For forty years the Hebrew people wandered through the desert of Sinai. There was no food, and the people complained. There was no water, and the people complained. It’s easy enough in the desert to feel surrounded only by beasts and trials.

In the desert the people made idols—gods better suited to their purposes than the Holy One who made heaven and earth. When God seems absent, there’s no telling what someone will turn to instead—which is why the opportunities for temptation are infinite. The trials of the desert led to an understanding of what it means to lose faith—a lesson still learned over and over today.

And yet, God was faithful. God fed the people. God gave them water. And when they turned to false gods, the living God remained true to the covenant made earlier: “You shall be my people and I shall be your God.”

The wilderness teaches us about faithfulness—the faithfulness of God through times of struggle, doubt, and temptation.

The wilderness teaches us who we are.

Even Jesus needed to learn the lesson of his identity. His baptism was a beginning. As with our baptism, however, it was only a beginning. What baptism meant about God’s covenant with him, what baptism meant about God’s claim upon Jesus would only become apparent as he lived his life. The actions he took, the choices he made would reveal who he was. The same is true for us today.

We strive never to compromise on our fundamental values, no matter what the situation is. We make that choice.

Our choices will show who we are. The wilderness reveals our identity.

In the wilderness we learn that we are not alone.

The crisis of the wilderness is brought on by a sense of the absence of God. The wilderness is the dwelling place of forces hostile to the God whose desire is life.

God’s people wind up in the wastelands all the time. No one, however, is alone in the wilderness. In our own wanderings we encounter the Hebrew people in search of the Promised Land. We run into Jesus, led by the Spirit.

No one is ever alone in the desert. Others travel there too. And in spite of appearances and feelings, God is present in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, we might learn that no one—not you, not me—no one is alone.

We can learn the lessons of faithfulness, of identity, and of the constant presence of the God who makes new life possible.

And so we are reminded today that the days of Lent are less about sorrow for sin and more about thanksgiving for God's forgiving grace. They are less about giving something up in our lives than they are about taking up the cause of peace and justice in our world.

Even in times of wilderness wandering and learning, even in times of testing and trial, we know how this story ends. We know how our story ends.

We begin this season of Lent at the edge of the wilderness—and let us do that with the end in mind. The end of Lent is Easter. The season that began with last Wednesday's reminder of our mortality ends with a celebration of the resurrection, with the joyful affirmation of the love of God that is stronger than death—even our own.