

THE TENTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

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Wilderness and Wandering

“The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”

Ahhh, the wilderness; the place where we find ourselves lost and wandering between those times in life when we’ve left the past behind, but have not quite yet found our future.

The Israelites sojourn in the desert teaches us a tender lesson about our own experiences of being lost, hungry and uncertain in our own desperate wanderings.

At this point the Israelites have fled the bondage of slavery and they are only a month or so into their exodus from Egypt--- just long enough for supplies to begin to run low.

They are still new to the wilderness of wandering and do not yet know that they will spend a very long time---generations in fact---- just wandering around between the Red Sea and the Promised Land before they finally cease being slaves to the past and embrace the reality of freedom.

This desert wilderness is Israel’s proving ground; it is the place where God acquires at last the heart of a people.

The wilderness, either real or metaphorical, is a place we all fear in some way—but it seems to be the richest and most fertile place to locate and understand how God is always present and at work in our lives even when we fear God has forgotten us; it can also teach us precisely who God is forming us to be.

The wilderness is an important and repeating theme in our sacred stories. It is always the place in which God’s people experience real change and transformation----- AND some of our most profound teachings are offered from people who come *out* of the wilderness.

John the Baptist came out of the wilderness and Jesus emerges from temptation in the wilderness to begin his ministry.

But they are just part of a long tradition: Elijah found his truth in the wilderness and David hid from Saul in the wilderness; it was where he grew from a confused boy into a king.

And of course, there is no greater wilderness experience than that of the whole people Israel who will emerge from the Wilderness to enter the Promised Land.

In theological terms, the wilderness experiences are those that serve as “liminal experiences”.

Liminal means “on the threshold.” So a liminal experience is one that finds us in “the space in between”. These are the times in our lives when we are called to move and to change---these are the times when we stand on the threshold of something new.

We experience such moments in our lives whenever we are anticipating a birth for example. Expectant parenthood is a liminal or threshold experience because for at least nine months (or more if you are adopting) a parent is no longer who they were, but they are not yet who they will be when this child finally arrives.

Almost all of our significant life events are liminal. A divorce or dissolution of a significant relationship, a new job or retirement, and death---either our own or that of someone we love---all of these moments are times when we stand with the past at our backs, but the future is still a bit uncertain.

Some of these events we anticipate with joy, others we fear or dread---and often the most profound of these liminal events are a potent brew of both anticipation and fear all rolled together!

But all of these threshold experiences are very similar to the wilderness experience as the Bible understands it.

To push this just a bit further, it is in these liminal times, these threshold experiences, that we are given a chance to redefine ourselves. In expectant parenthood we consider what sort of parents we will be and prepare the baby's room. In a job change--- including retirement, we get an opportunity to redefine of ourselves.

And when someone we love dies, it calls for a reordering of our life without that person present in the same way and that can be an overwhelming adjustment.

This morning we join the Israelites in the betwixt and between and in this now but not yet place they are fast developing a tendency toward grumbling about their fate. It quickly becomes apparent that they are not spiritually free; they are unable to cope as liberated people.

In the first blush of their deliverance they already invoke the fleshpots of Egypt; they apparently possess a healthy remembrance of a hearty diet. In another story of these wanderings they say "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic."

But remember, Israel wasn't eating salmon dinners in a fine restaurant or cucumber sandwiches at a garden party. The Israelites were slaves. They ate for free because they worked for free. Pharaoh provided them with fish and all the trimmings but only so they could make more bricks, cut more stone, move more blocks. ¹

So once again God hears their cries and they receive the gift of what they would call manna, the "bread of heaven."

Manna. A friend of mine calls manna the original wonder bread, the wonder bread from heaven in fact. This is a "fun with Hebrew moment: "manna" literally means "what is it?" Remember what we hear in the story, "When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another 'What is it?"

So Manna is "wonder-what-this-stuff-is bread."

What we are told is that every morning, the manna covered the ground like a fine mist. Everyone collected what they needed for the day and any manna leftover would rot. Manna was then the original daily bread. Except on Fridays when you got twice as much as you needed so you could rest on the Sabbath and that double portion stayed miraculously fresh.

Abundant manna was a miracle that pointed to God's never ending care for us in our desperate in-between places----- So there is a bit of delicious Hebrew irony when very soon they will complain again to Moses saying that "there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

This is a problem of the human condition. Manna is a sign of God's love, but in their grumbling they will in effect say, "Everywhere we look we see nothing but the miracle of God providing for us but we want more!"

The wonder of finding food in an uninhabitable waste land is replaced by "Wonder what else there is to eat around here? "If only we had meat to eat!"²

How many times--- / *wonder*---do we stand in the presence of God's abundant grace and still grumble for more?

I think the Israelites are very much like all of us. We are a people seeking to follow God. But when the going gets a bit tough we all begin grumbling against God a little bit.

The place between where we've been and where we really want to be definitely tests us. It forces us to really find out what we are made of and what we really believe. The wilderness is the place that strips us bare and reveals our weaknesses.

But because God loves us and feeds us through it all we are strengthened by what we learn of ourselves in these times. When we cooperate with God we *always* emerge from the wilderness transformed. We cross the threshold as a new creation.

That is the power in all of our threshold experiences. Tremendous positive change happens around the time of birth, baptism, marriage, divorce, job changes, retirement, and yes---even dying and death.

We can use the power of these threshold experiences to redefine ourselves as individuals and as a people of faith.

In all these times of transition we have an opportunity to can claim our strength as a people of liberation and freedom ---a people who never need to fear the future, even when it is unclear, because we have learned to trust that God is present with us always and everywhere.

¹ Frank Logue

² Ibid.

The very same is now truer than ever when we think on all of the changes happening in the Church. All indications point to the reality that Church is at yet another threshold place. An old way of being the Church is passing away and God is creating something new and we at St. Stephen's stand on the threshold with everyone else.

It is very tempting to dream of the way things used to be and grumble about the situation in the present. But what the Israelites remind us today is that the past wasn't always as good as we remember and that tomorrow is equally if not more, rich with the promise of God's renewal and transformation.

None of ever need to fear the wilderness; the wilderness is always where we rediscover ourselves and find the courage to embrace true freedom; the wilderness is a place rich with the wonders of God; the place where we will always be fed.
Amen.

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