

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Exodus 16:1-8

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."

Feed Me!

The anthem this morning got it right. The people were indeed "bound for the promised land." Moses the reluctant leader did as he was told. In time, Pharaoh, wearied by all the plagues, said "be gone!" And though Pharaoh's men and horses later gave chase, they didn't get far when the Red Sea waters overtook them. God heard the people's groanings, God intervened. The people were on their way, freed from slavery in Egypt and "bound for the promised land".

They journey a while, stop at a oasis called Elim, and then continue on their way. And then things go south. Instead of a land of milk and honey, they get a hot and sandy desert. Deliverance at the sea leads into godforsaken wilderness. Dancers and singers (Miriam and her pals) are stopped dead in their tracks. As one commentator describes it, salvation from one kind of death (slavery in Egypt) leads in the teeth of another (starvation in the desert) (Interpretation commentary on Exodus, Terrance Fretheim, p. 171)

So, the people complain. They complain because they are hungry. They complain because they are physically and emotionally exhausted. They complain because the wilderness, this place they are in, hardly looks temporary anymore -- It is, in fact, beginning to look a lot like *home*.

Pastors love this text you know. It's hard to be a leader. *People have been known to complain against those who try to lead them.* See how people can be? See how people are picking on Moses here? Where's the gratitude? Where's the faith?

But I don't want to take that tack this Sunday, the gee aren't people wrong for giving Moses – or God – the business. I don't want to take that approach because my sense is that this is where some of us are, in the wilderness, and no, we don't need or want to be shamed for it. Las Vegas erupted early this week, and so did tempers. What possesses someone to do a thing like this? What does it mean that this keeps happening, and nothing changes? As the Boston Globe said, there are fears on both sides of the gun control debate and out they came, in real time discussions and on Facebook.

It was a full moon this week, and I don't know about you, but it felt like it had people by the throat. People seem touchier than usual, more frustrated, impatient. Shellie our office administrator had an incident of road rage directed at her this week. On her way to work, a young man followed her nearly on her bumper. When she got to a stop sign, he yelled out and threw something at her car. In grocery lines, in traffic, in workplaces people seem on edge. The wilderness will do that to you. In our story today, there is a food crisis that leads to a faith crisis. The people ask: How can we focus on God and God's promises of deliverance when our stomachs are growling? Wouldn't we have been better off back in Egypt where life was hard but we ate our fill? I am reminded of a film we saw some years ago on hunger in America. A little girl going off to school hungry each day listens to her teacher up front. In time she can't hear what the teacher is saying Wah Wah Wah and as she looks at her teacher at the head of the class the teachers head turns into a giant hamburger. It is hard to focus on anything else when basic needs aren't met.

The sermon title today comes from a children's book I happily read to my children entitled *The Hungry Thing Returns*. In a village, a rather sweet looking creature arrives amidst the people with a sign around her neck that says, "Feed Me". She talks in a funny sort of code, with words that need to be deciphered, sharing what it is she'd like to eat or what she needs. Mice cream would be ice cream and mathboom is bathroom, that sort of thing. What is so touching is that all the people gather round and work very hard to understand this hungry thing, to figure out her needs, to help her get her needs met. The vision of community is lovely – and a far cry the compassion fatigue, the mockery, that seems so prevalent today.

In the months since our election, I have had people tell me that they are finding family members hard to deal with, that is, if they voted differently and actually venture to talk about it. I have had people tell me that the results of the election have led them to question God, or at least be mad at the world. And, like many of you, I've read Facebook posts that suggest political discussions -- rather than a discussion of content, the real stuff -- has become more like a sporting event, with jeering and mockery and derision of the other team the way it goes.

This is our wilderness. There are pastors I know who will not go to an anti racism rally, because there might be someone in their church who will then demand that they show up at an NRA rally. There are pastors I know counting the days until retirement, because it is getting harder to keep people working together. Our wilderness time is fractious, complaining, embittered, and extraordinarily fearful.

We might pause here and return to scripture, remembering that the people in the desert are feeling *overwhelmed*. Their muscles ache, their stomachs growl, and they can't see a way forward. They ask for the security and resources of Egypt, preferable now to freedom and living from one oasis to another. They are caught between a past they cannot recapture and a future that is entirely uncertain. You could not pick a better bible lesson for today. How do we find hope, sanctuary, a way forward in the midst of wilderness times?

Some of you know we are working off a narrative lectionary, a way of organizing scripture that puts the focus on the stories that form our faith. What you may not know is that the worship resources I use come to us from the United Kingdom, which means they occasionally share cultural things that may be new to us. What I learned this week is information about the song, the hymn, we will sing very shortly. *Guide me O Thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land*. The words of this great hymn show such sensitivity to the Israelite journey through the wilderness that in some places the title of this hymn has been given as "Prayer for strength for the journey through the world's wilderness."

It is one of the best known and most loved hymns of our time, and in the UK it is indelibly associated with Welsh male voice choirs and sung often at sporting encounters involving men and women wearing the scarlet jackets of the Welsh National Team, rugby and soccer both. Often the crowd sings along, with gusto. The song of the church becomes the song of the contest, with the promise that God will send strength. The sense of togetherness of a mass crowd singing together is a strong symbol of unity and togetherness....in fact, the curriculum notes "one might recognize this as a pulling together of our shared humanity. " (Spill the Beans, October 8, 2017. P. 38)

There are wilderness times we all experience together, like the week just past. Tonight Dayna, a seminary friend of mine, a pastor in LA will lead a service of healing in response to the Las Vegas killings -- a member of her church was at that concert and is understandably traumatized from her experience. Good pastor that my friend is, she wants her church to respond.

There are wilderness times that are more individual, but of the sort we will all experience at one time or another. The death of a parent, the illness of a spouse, having to care for someone we love dearly and having to watch them suffer. We all know people in such wilderness times. We may be there ourselves.

There's an important message that comes through our scripture today. Deliverance comes, *but not in being removed from the wilderness*. The people of Israel remain in the desert, but they are given manna, which may be a substance released from the tamarisk plant that grows in the desert when a bug punctures the plant – It's a starchy, sweet substance that native people today make bread from, manna bread they call it. Right around them, within reach, from nature itself comes what the people need to survive. *But nothing comes in and beams them on out*. What are the resources God will provide, the resources that will help us persevere in this wilderness time?

There's also a message here about spiritual maturity. When times are tough it is easy, in fact commonplace to turn on others, on leaders, or on other figures in our life, and turn that person into the problem, or the demon. When times are tough it's commonplace to dismiss someone (or a group of people) who've been difficult for us.

What if we stopped, and like the villagers in the Hungry Thing Returns wondered what the person in front of us is fearful of, or hungry for?
What if in our interactions with others we led with wonder rather than judgment?

The wilderness asks questions of us all. Will we pause and see that even when the future is most uncertain, even when the climate is tense and troubling, there is still encouragement, there is still nourishment, there is still hope to be found? There is a way to live in the wilderness – to say this is a statement of faith and it may be the church's great call, here, today, to help people wrestle with that question, that challenge.

How will we find our way? I think we will find it where people pull together, share and listen. I think of the women in our church who each Monday offer hospitality downstairs for Monday meals. Sometimes it just looks like a warm place to get a meal. Other times, when people are warmly regarded, when people comfort and console one another, it is like manna from heaven. I think of our new prayer shawl ministry, breaking down the isolation so many people feel when they are sick or otherwise hurting. Sometimes it even happens at coffee hour. Someone asks someone else, how are you doing? I mean really, How are you? and they pull up a chair and *listen*.

What will we do in wilderness times? Where will our energies go? How will we be about God's work of healing creation, healing community and healing ourselves? And if God isn't going to beam us out of this place and this time any time soon how will we walk with faithfulness and integrity today?

Amen.