

“In the Wilderness”

Exodus 16 – 40, selected, and Deuteronomy 8

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Scripture: Wandering in the Wilderness

In the middle of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt, the whole congregation of the Israelites set out, and came to the wilderness of Sin. And the whole congregation complained against Moses and his brother Aaron: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill our whole assembly with hunger.” The Lord said to Moses, “I have heard the people’s complaining; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall have meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’” And in the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

From there the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages in the wilderness, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink. Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Sermon

Unless you’ve been a refugee, how hard it is to appreciate what it is they’ve gone through! It’s a feeling, I would imagine, of utter elation and relief: to be freed from slavery, to be freed from certain death, to be freed from oppression, to be freed from knowing that you are no people and have no place. To be freed and to know that you have life. Refugees around the world in every age have known this feeling. The Jews released from the Nazi’s have known this feeling. The occupied countries in WWII have known this feeling. The Armenians fleeing the Turks have known this feeling. The Sudanese, the Somalians, the Cambodians, in our own generation alone, many people have known this feeling. There is an elation that comes from liberation – from being freed when you did not know whether life would continue.

And then there is that feeling of letdown and fear when you realize that you’ve been freed only to find yourself at risk. In the wilderness, a people with no homeland, a people with no

place to go, a people for whom food itself is not guaranteed, a people whose future looks nearly as bleak as its past. It is one thing to be liberated; it is another thing to find abundant life.

Maybe we can relate to it a little bit in our own lives. There is a feeling for anyone who has endured a grievous illness, who has come into severe pain, who has known what it is like to not know whether you would survive the cancer or the heart attack or the terrible illness that has gripped you. It is a wonderful feeling to awake at one moment and know that you'll live! But so often isn't it the case that even after you've awakened there is a steep recovery that follows? Or so it is with heartache, when you know finally that moment that you can go on, you can live again, you can survive ... but then to know that the grief takes some time to abate. There are times when you wonder whether it was worth it in the end.

So it is for the people of the exodus, and so it is for people of faith throughout the generations. St. Paul marks the work of salvation with two different words -- the work of salvation, the work of being made whole. The first word is "justification" -- that moment when you know that you are saved. And then there's the work of "sanctification", that long, long, long path of being made holy. Salvation -- wholeness -- usually comes in two parts; in the first part we are certain of God's presence, no? The second part is harder; and we ask with the Israelites, "is the Lord among us or not"?

Sometimes it is the smallest thing that comforts us: the bread in the wilderness, the cup that soothes our thirst, that gives us hope, that reminds us of God's presence again.

Scripture: The 10 Commandments

On the third new moon after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, on that very day they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in front of the mountain. On the third day there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud, all the people trembled. Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke, for the Lord had descended on it in fire; and the mountain shook violently. The Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and he went up. Then God spoke these words to him:

1. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol, in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them,

but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

5. Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor."

And the Lord gave many other commandments concerning offerings and the tabernacle for the worship of the Lord their God, as well as justice and violence and life together in community as befits God's people.

Sermon

It isn't just to test us that God gives us time between freedom and arriving in our promised land. It isn't just to test us that God gives us this time. It is to remind us, first, that it is God who provides for our needs, and not we ourselves. It is, second, to form us as a people, to form us into a community, to give us the rules we need, to know what it means to be a people of God. To take us from being slaves, to being a covenant people, ready to keep the promises of God. Physical well being is not the sum total of what it means to have salvation. Wholeness of life, wholeness (which is what salvation means) is not only about being freed from terror, freed from illness, freed from slavery. It is also being freed *for* being the people we are meant to be.

Notice that there are two key ways that we become God's people. Jesus summarized it this way: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength; and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. All of the Ten Commandments are summarized in those two things: You shall have no other Gods before me, you shall not make yourself an idol, you shall not make yourself wrong use of the name of the Lord, remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy -- all of these things are ways that we love the Lord our God. But loving the Lord our God is not enough; to be God's people, we love our neighbor as well. So six of the Ten Commandments have to do with other people: God intends for us to honor our father and our mother. God intends for us not to murder or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness that is to lie, or covet the things that do not belong to us. This is what it means to be a people of God, to be a people of faithfulness: to have our love for God and have our love for neighbor too. When we get that, then we will be ready to see the promised land.

Scripture: The Golden Calf

While Moses was up on the mountain, the people saw the thunder and lightning, and the mountain smoking; and they trembled with fear. So when Moses delayed coming down the mountain, the people appealed to Aaron: “Make gods to go before us; as for this Moses, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said, “Take off the gold rings on your ears, and bring them to me.” So they gave him their gold rings, and he cast the gold into an image of a calf. They all said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Then Aaron built an altar; and they offered burnt offerings and sacrifices to the calf; and they ate and drank and rose up to revel.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have acted perversely: they cast a golden calf and worshiped it. Let me alone so my wrath may consume them.” But Moses implored the Lord: “Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt? Should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent he freed them, to kill them in the mountains?’ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how you swore, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and I will give them this land.’” So the Lord changed his mind. And Moses went down the mountain with the tablets of the covenant in his hands. As he neared the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger rose, and he threw the tablets down and broke them at the foot of the mountain; and he took the golden calf and burned it, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Cut two new tablets; I will write the words from the tablets you broke.” So Moses cut two tablets of stone; and early in the morning he went up on Mt. Sinai. The Lord descended in the cloud and passed by him and proclaimed,
 “The Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant; then he returned down the mountain to his people.

Sermon

How quickly we lose faith in the one who saves us! We are afraid: maybe we don’t have the leadership we need, maybe we’re just uncertain of whether the Lord is really with us or not. How quickly we lose faith in the one who saves us. We make our own “gods of gold” don’t we? Don’t we still? It’s so much easier to rely on something tangible in front of you, no? It’s so much easier to rely on the “stuff” that you can touch. It’s so much easier to know how much money you have in the bank, what your house is worth as long as it doesn’t slide too much. It’s so much easier to think about the 401k, or the IRA, or the wealth you inherited or the job you still have. It’s easier. You can see it, you can touch it, it buys things. No wonder we build golden calves.

We're vulnerable when we're afraid. I think about the fear we have that we never name. I hate to use stories out of our household, but the other day, Annie and I are sitting in the living room hearing yet another story about the environment and she asks, "Are we all going to die from the environment changing?" Yes, if nothing happens, yes, it won't be my generation, but it might be hers and it might be her children's. Yes, I'm afraid. I think about the situation in Iraq, and I think about the unrest in the Middle East. I don't know if you let it filter into your minds very often, but when it does, it's pretty terrifying. I think about Iran getting nuclear capabilities. I think about a lot of things that make me afraid and quite honestly, sometimes it's hard to trust that things really will be OK. When we're afraid, then we're at risk of relying on the things that are not God.

But here's the thing: God keeps forgiving and providing and keeps forgiving and keeps providing. The Lord, the Lord, the God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation. In this, in this, we might be willing to trust.

Scripture: The Construction of the Tabernacle

Moses assembled all the congregation of the Israelites and said to them: "This the Lord has commanded you: Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord." And he also said to them: "This also the Lord has commanded: "Take an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, acacia wood for building, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense." Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering. They came, both men and women, all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen brought them. Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood brought it. The leaders brought the spices and the oil for the light. All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

Then the finest craftsmen set to work, to build the Lord a tabernacle -- the tent of meeting -- in which to worship the Lord. And they built the ark of the covenant, within which would rest the ten commandments, to place in the holiest place in the tabernacle, a sign of their covenant with the Lord their God.

When Moses saw that they had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded, he blessed them. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

Sermon

“For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.” And then they get it: that God is for them; that God is with them, that God is beside them, that God always surrounds them, forgiving, renewing, desiring their wholeness and so they give their gold. They give their gold and their silver and their bronze and their wood and all of their precious things with glad and generous hearts with stirred hearts and willing spirits, their best, their all, an offering to God to build a place to meet him, a place that is worthy of the Lord their God.

Today, the Stewardship Committee has asked me to preach a stewardship sermon. I’ll confess that the committee might not be altogether happy with I’m about to say. Whatever we decide to give to the Lord is not about the budget. Whatever we decide to give to the Lord is not about whether or not we have good programs for our children. Whatever we decide to give to the Lord is not about paying for my salary or the other salaries, and whether or not I’m doing a good job. It’s not about whether we are paying for the heating oil. Yes, all of these things need to be done. Stewardship is about this and only this: is the Lord with us or not? Is the Lord the one who saves us or not? Is the Lord more reliable than our golden calves or not? Is the Lord worthy of our worship, worthy of our praise? Do we rely on the Lord alone?

I want to say that there are temptations when we are in the wilderness, temptations to hold back from God – to hold back because we are afraid, and because we rely on other things. But I also, in the end, want to say this: there are temptations when we are no longer in the wilderness. There are temptations when we’re comfortable too.

Scripture: Moses’ farewell instructions (Deuteronomy 8)

Now the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. At the end of these years, they prepared to cross the river Jordan, into the land the Lord had promised their fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then Moses gathered the people, and reminded them of God’s promises, and the covenant that he made:

“This commandment you must diligently observe, so you may live, and go in to the land the Lord promised to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting

you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ... Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the land that he has given you.

“Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God. When you have eaten your fill and built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness. He made water flow for you from rock, and fed you in the wilderness to humble you and test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.”

Sermon:

Beloved in Christ, God has led us through the wilderness, I think, and leads us still. The question that faces us this day – whether we are in the wilderness in our own lives, or whether we are living in the land of abundance -- the only question facing us is this: “Is the Lord with us or not?” I hope and I pray that we will remember this: “The Lord is good; and His steadfast love endures forever.” Amen.