

The Wilderness Edge

Exodus 13: 17-21

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

In downtown Detroit, overlooking the Detroit River is a statue commemorating the underground railroad. The name of the sculpture is entitled *The Gateway to Freedom* and it depicts six runaway slaves—a few men, a couple women with their children, a mother holding her baby—all looking anticipatorily over the river toward Windsor, Canada. One of the men is pointing over the water toward Windsor to the promised land where freedom awaits. It is an image of Moses and the Israelites overlooking the Red Sea’s waters. Now they sit on the edge of the gateway to their freedom. Perhaps we can imagine one of them, pointing out over the waters as they look ahead into the barren wilderness to the promised land where their freedom awaits.

Let’s start with good news: God has set us free to be God’s people. When God dreamed about human partners who could make our world a more just and loving place, God created you and me. When God imagined who would be wildly free to spread hope in the darkness of despair, God imagined you. People who could carry the beams of love to build a society where everyone has enough. People who would be free from systemic handcuffs where the Pharaohs of our world do not get to call the shots. The salvation of God according to the Old Testament is about freeing us physically, emotionally and spiritually. There are 15 million people in our nation who don’t have access to clean water. God cares about that! Out of those who do have health care, 73% can’t afford to use it. God cares about that! People who are working more for less pay—perhaps we are some of them. God cares about that! Did you hear about the judge in Pennsylvania who collected \$1 million in bribes from developers of juvenile detention centers? He was sentencing teenagers just to pad his own pockets, trading in kids-for-cash—now it’s a thing. God cares about setting us free body, mind and spirit to be people who use their freedom to make our world more kind, loving, and just for all. It’s good news!

Of course, when we look out toward freedom’s promise it is an ambiguous path through the wilderness. The wilderness is not a place most of us would choose to go voluntarily. There are no cozy bed and breakfasts. It’s not a hot spot for tourism. It’s a place of challenge where we

come face-to-face with the parts of ourselves we've spent a lot of energy trying to avoid. Not to mention, there's a theological problem as well: God keeps the Israelites in the wilderness a long time. Why does it take so long? The way the crow flies, the most direct route from Egypt to Gaza is 250 miles. It's like a road trip to Ashville and back; or a half-day journey to Charleston, WV. It should take the Israelites about 13 days on foot. Thirteen days is enough wilderness for me. But for some reason, God keeps leading them in roundabout circles for 40 years. Have you seen the meme where Moses has his GPS out and the voice on his phone says, "You will arrive at your destination in 40 years." Moses looks at the phone quizzically as he thinks, "*Now that can't be right!*" He's right, that can't be right. The only thing to look forward to about being in the wilderness is no longer being in it. If freedom's path is through the wilderness, why would God keep God's people wandering around in the wilderness for so long?

Well, I wonder. I wonder if the journey takes as long as it does because the wilderness is where we learn to depend on God. It hurts to say that. It is difficult to do. Did you know? The writers of the bible reference the wilderness experience almost 300 times—that's listening to grandma retelling the same story a lot of time! Why so many times? Because it is where they became a people with a new primary identity. Where they learned who they really were and whose they really were. How long does something like that take? You know, I'm going to be forty-one-years old in a few weeks. So far learning to depend on God has taken me forty years; it will probably take me forty more.

Once met a woman named Veronica who was very poor. She barely had enough to feed her kids. She prioritized her bills like those who live in poverty have to do. But whenever you'd speak to her, she'd always say the same thing: "God is good, God is good!" One day, after hearing about how she lost her job after running out of gas one morning on the way to work, she said it again, "God is good!" I just had to ask: "How can you say that God is good after all you've been through?" She said, "Honey listen, when the car broke down a couple months ago, a check for a thousand dollars showed up in the mail. When I wasn't sure how to pay for groceries one Christmas, someone at the store handed me a \$50 gift card. When I went through the drive-thru at Wendy's just the other day, I realized I left my purse at home. And when I pulled up to the window to explain, the cashier said the person in front of me paid for my meal. Honey, I've been in this place for so long, eventually you just stop worrying about things and learn to trust God."

I am not sure how long it would take me to learn that lesson—maybe forty years; maybe more. I bet if we were to share a story about a time in our lives when we felt God's presence the strongest, it was probably a moment when we found ourselves in the wilderness too—when we had questions about where our life was headed or when we felt lost or alone or afraid. And it is these stories which form our faith. It is why our bibles recall the wilderness events almost 300 times. Because it's where we learn to become a people who depend on God.

So as we look over the landscape of Lent this year, how are we going to trust God? Maybe Lent gives us an excuse to let go of an unhealthy habit or take on a healthy one. Maybe it is just another liturgical church thing we don't pay much attention to. But I wonder what it would mean if we began to tell our wilderness stories? The stories of our trials. The stories of trust. The stories of our formation.

You see, God needs wilderness people. People who are set free to free others, so people like Veronica can eat, and have a life like the rest of us. I think it's a wilderness worth following God though, don't you? No matter how many steps it takes. No matter how many years.