

September 24, 2017

Sermon:

"In the Wilderness"

Rev. Anderson

Please pray with me:

God of wilderness, God of meadow and pasture, we come to you like the tribes of Israel seeking assurance and direction, seeking nourishment and strong reminders of your presence. We thank you for your promises and reminders that we are your people and that your blessing is there for us whenever we are ready to turn to you. Open our ears and our hearts this morning. Feed our spirits and give us the stamina to continue our journey, growing closer and closer to you: Creator, Savior, and strengthen guide. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

I want to focus this morning on wilderness journeys. I will bet that most of us, when we set off on a journey do not go off seeking a wilderness. When my wife and I took off for Amsterdam a week ago we were seeking a beautiful, exciting city full of things to do and see and we are happy that we found one.

This has not been the case in much of our traveling. Many of the places we have gone could be called a wilderness, yet we have always found them beautiful and exciting and often much more. We have found journeying through wildernesses as a purifying experience. They have always prepared us for something special in our lives.

My first such trip took us into the Sinai desert to the Moses Mountain where the scene in our Hebrew Bible Lesson may have taken place (no one is sure of the actual location, it was thousands of years ago and the Tribes of Israel did not have a GPS.)

As we walked through the desert we expected it to be dry and lifeless, we realized, however, that it was full of plants and all kinds of life. As we approached the mountain, Lee had tummy trouble and almost had to give up climbing to the top, she was rescued by a Bedouin who gave her a ride most of the way up on his camel. Later in the day as we prepared to ascend another mountain, I watched our Bedouin guide pick herbs from several plants as we walked along. While we took a break he built a fire and brewed tea from the herbs. Lee drank the tea and her discomfort went away. On that day we began to really appreciate the richness of God's gifts to us, even in a place we had considered barren.

We have experienced many deserts and found their simplicity and relative sterility liberating, freeing us to think about our lives, about what God was calling us to.

The pilgrimage we walked across Spain was not across a desert; there were some pretty barren stretches, but much of it was rich country full of life. It did, however, provide the time and isolation that opened our minds and helped us think about who we were and more important, whose we were.

When I reflect on today's lesson, I realize that Moses could have taken a shortcut on his way to the Promised Land. It did not have to take 40 years. Joseph's brothers did it in just over a week. But if Moses took the easy way a far different people would have made the entry into Canaan. God did not want them to get there too quickly. If they had they would always have been tempted to go back and turn to other little 'g' gods when things got tough. In the end, they were far tougher and better organized and they knew God far better. They better appreciated God's gifts and their own dependence on God.

I am sure that they were still complaining about the food and everything else. Remember: Israel means "the one who contends or wrestles with God." I can hear them now, can't you? "Oh, my feet are killing me! These confounded sandals are rubbing blisters on my toes, are we there yet? I'm hungry." This way they better understood that God had chosen them to change the world and they were following a very difficult path.

We also need to realize that there are many kinds of wilderness that we experience. There are times when our lives as individuals and as groups seem empty and bleak, when life has lost its meaning and our compass needle only wants to keep spinning rather than settle on a solid direction. These are often times when we feel very alone, even in the middle of a crowd. All our landmarks have disappeared and we begin to forget that there are beautiful blue skies just above the overcast skies we look up to.

I have spoken to many of you about our congregation and know that feeling of wandering in the wilderness is present. We needed to mourn our loss and spend some time thinking and talking about whom we are and what God is leading us to. We are now seeing progress. Our profile is done and will be off to Rev. McPhee this afternoon. We are organizing the committee that will work with a new interim Minister. I am not going to make a cheesy reference to the Promised Land, but I know that God has a purpose and a plan for Christ Church and for everybody here.

The message I got from the Gospel lesson this morning is that there is always work to do. God needs us. God loves us. God's grace is always with us whether we are wandering in the wilderness or firmly on God's path.

Israel, despite the complaining and the missteps, learned that God was as present to them on the journey as at the destination. Jesus promised that when two or three gather in His name he would be with them. He is with us and will stay with us. Let us pray together: Thank you Lord, Jesus, for walking with us and helping us find the way. Knowing that your grace is there for us when we are ready is a blessing in itself. Give us the courage to face and grow from the wilderness times in our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen