

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-14, 24-29 Bill Uetricht 9/26/24 19 Pentecost

I have always been a fan of the wilderness stories in the Bible. They are full of hyperbole, exaggeration, and thus are often quite funny. They are so real. While they may not necessarily be historical, they are so true.

For many of us, wilderness is a great metaphor for where we often find ourselves. Terry Fretheim says that the wilderness is “a buffer between liberation and landed-ness,” a crossover point, a threshold, where you hang out after you have been set free and yet haven’t fully arrived. Jesus was baptized, was given an identity, was named “Son of God.” And then he was cast into the wilderness. For forty days and forty nights, he stayed there. And after that threshold, that buffer, he began his ministry, found his place, even if that place was always changing and a matter of great challenge.

The Old Testament tells us the story of the people of Israel being set free, being liberated from the hands of the Egyptians. Yet they don’t go from Egypt to the Promised Land. They roam in the wilderness for forty years. Obviously, somebody didn’t stop and ask for directions, for it shouldn’t have taken forty years to travel the distance that they went. But again, this isn’t history. This is metaphor. This is the way life is. We spend a lot of time in the wilderness, sometimes roaming around, not knowing where we are going, not asking for directions. And if I can be honest, sometimes it feels like we spend much of our time in the wilderness.

Occasionally, I feel like I am about ready to walk into the Promised Land, and boom, I am taken back in the wilderness. Lately, with one death after another and news of all kinds of serious sicknesses, the wilderness for me is not simply metaphor; it’s real history. I don’t want to be macabre or morbid, but sometimes I wonder if the wilderness is not reality.

The Book of Numbers (literally in the Hebrew, “in the wilderness”) gives us the majority of the Biblical wilderness stories. Today we get one of the complaining stories. We are told that the “rabble among them” (this could be some outsiders) had a strong craving, and the Israelites were weeping because they didn’t like their food choices. “Oh, if we only had meat to eat. Oh, if we only had some fish, some cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and who could leave out, garlic.” We had all of that back in Egypt. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s form a “Go-back-to-Egypt” committee!

This is one of the real challenges of being in the wilderness. You begin to think that it was a lot better in the past, even if the past included slavery. You know, the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, they were so much better. Let’s go back to them. Let’s form a “Go-back-to-the-seventies” committee. I personally think that disco got some bad press. I wouldn’t mind a little more, “Night fever, Night Fever.” But honestly, I am not needing the leisure suits.

This is one of the temptations of the wilderness—the temptation to go back. It’s where a lot of people spend their time and energy when they are in the wilderness. But there is no going back. The wilderness is preparing us for a new future.

But you know, when you are in the wilderness the future feels far away. The familiar “orderliness of the past seems preferable,” as Fretheim puts it, “to the insecurities of life lived from one oasis to another.” The wilderness feels quite insecure. Sometimes it feels downright oppressive, which is why we complain a lot in the wilderness, why we cry profusely.

The food *doesn’t* taste all the good. And it’s not filling. And honestly, as mean as those Egyptians were, at least they gave us a little meat. Once in a while, a nice little piece of salmon would be good. And we are supposed to be happy with manna. Really? Yuck!

Complaining, lamenting—they are part of the process when you are in the wilderness. It's what you do sometimes. At times it's just telling the truth, and at other times it sure sounds like a lack of gratitude.

I don't know, but maybe that is why God is ticked off today and Moses is displeased. Numbers tells us: "Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families because of the food situation, all at the entrances of their tents, in other words, so everybody could hear them. And God became very angry, and Moses was displeased, so displeased that Moses gets worked up with God:

Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why don't you like me anymore? What have I done to you that you would put all this burden on me, give me this nasty, whiny bunch of Israelites. I didn't give birth to these people. You did. And you want me to care for them as a nurse does for a suckling child? How am I supposed to get meat for all these people? Tell me. I can't handle this on my own.

Whoa! Moses is honest! He's not afraid to ask God to be accountable. He's even willing to be a little needy. He, the leader of the people, is willing to identify his limits. How is *he* supposed to manage this whole people?

Here is what you are free to do in the wilderness. You are free to tell the truth. While neediness doesn't really look that good on you, sometimes you can even be a little needy and maybe even a little ungrateful. And you definitely can identify your limits. It isn't all up to you.

Now I'll admit that I am not very good at that. I suspect that for me my identity has been wrapped up in my pushing the limits. I have participated in a sport (triathlon) that is all about *pushing* the limits. I came from a conservative, blue-collar family that valued hard work. I probably have given myself points for working harder

than most. My wife has frequently told me that I need to let go of things that other folks could do. And knowing that she probably wouldn't get very far with the argument that I should recognize my limits, she tells me that folks in the future won't do what I do. She's right. But in the wilderness, / and you are free to recognize our limits.

We are free, as Moses did, to struggle with God. In the wilderness, the relationship is not simply about smiling and nodding. In the wilderness, there is freedom to wrestle with God, to ask God the hard questions, to lay it on the line with God. The name Israel literally means "the ones who struggle with God." The whole of the Old Testament is about a people who struggle with God. Much of contemporary Christianity, especially that which you experience in the media, doesn't name that struggle. It tells you that life is all clear; in God, all problems are resolved. In this view, faith is not about questions, but answers. I think I surprised some folks this past Sunday at a memorial service when I said: "Sometimes life stinks. And this is one of the sometimes." Faith isn't about resolving the struggle. It's about entering it.

And as we have told you so many times before, entering the struggle is not something you do alone. When you are in the wilderness, you have to get this. You do have limits. And other people are there to help.

So Moses gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.

You are right, Moses. You can't do it alone. You need help. Here are 70 folks. Life lived best is life lived in community. Life lived best is not life lived independently, focused only on you and your ability

to manage the struggles of the wilderness. We're in the wilderness together.

And what that togetherness looks like may challenge you sometimes. Eldad and Medad, who don't always follow the right procedures, might be those who are there to help you. Some who are not a part of your *group* but who are still doing the work of Jesus might be the ones to bring you a cup of cold water. Truthfully, in the wilderness, the labels we give to people aren't always that helpful. When you are in the wilderness, whether people are in your club, have your label, agree with you on everything really doesn't matter. When you are going in for brain surgery, whether your brain surgeon is Lutheran, Pentecostal, Muslim, or Jewish isn't going to mean that much. You want to know that she knows what she is doing, that she can be of help to you. Those who aren't against us are for us. In the wilderness, there is plenty of room for all kinds of people. In the wilderness the struggle is too intense and too real for us to resort to dividing people into "us and them." In the wilderness, we're all in this together.

The wilderness is real. It's where we spend much of our time. Ya, I know. The Israelites eventually moved into the Promised Land. I know. Jesus' death gave way to resurrection. And it's worth our while to keep that truth in the forefront of our minds. But sometimes, if we are honest, we will admit that we spend a lot of time in the wilderness. Know this. As Moses, Israel, and even Jesus discovered, while the wilderness is a hard place, it is not a God-abandoned place. Yes, it is a locus, a place for struggle. But the struggle is a struggle with God, the God who set us free and the God who one day will bring us home.