

In The Wilderness

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

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Being in the wilderness is an image that may mean different things to us – depending on our own experiences and interpretations of wilderness. Sometimes it might be a positive image. Camping and hiking in a designated “wilderness” area may hold a wonderful memory. Growing up in the Midwest, the physical image of “wilderness” that I carry is of Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota and Quetico Provincial Park across the border in Ontario. And other than mosquitoes the size of hummingbirds, it holds a very positive memory for me.

Today's reading from Exodus uses the physical image of wilderness as an important part of the Biblical narrative. The ancient Israelite people, having been led by Moses, have escaped their slavery in Egypt in a dramatic way. They have miraculously crossed the sea while the Egyptians, in hot pursuit, all drowned. Now they are somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula which was also known as the Wilderness of Sin or Zin. This name does not have a connection to our understanding of “sin,” but was a Hebrew word that could be translated as moon.

And “moon” is actually a helpful image for me for this Biblical wilderness. It isn't like my personal image of wilderness from northern Minnesota, of lakes and trails and trees and quiet. The Sinai landscape is of desert and rocks and sand and mountains with little shade or water – not unlike my image of the landscape of the moon.

So there they all were. Recently escaping their enemies in the most dramatic way, and now they are complaining. No food. No water. And evidently no memory. But then, don't you think we all would be complaining in similar circumstances? Not unlike the lament, “but what have you done for me lately?”

In response to their lament, God sends meat and bread. Quail we most likely know of or have an image that we hold. It isn't that unfamiliar. But the bread is another story. The Hebrew people had no idea what it was. In fact, the name “manna” is from the Hebrew question “what is it?” And scholars tell us that it was probably a sticky, protein-rich substance excreted by insects.

Now, if I hadn't been complaining before, I certainly would be now.

But, even with this less than appetizing offer, the people survive. They continue on their journey. They eventually reach Canaan where they settle and begin the next chapter of their lives as the Hebrew people. But on the journey they needed help in recognizing that God was always present with them – loving, listening, and responding – whether they recognized it or not.

And that may be a part of what wilderness is all about – regardless of location – in the forgetting that God is with us and that we are not alone.

In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew most of us probably hear the parable of the laborers in the vineyard they way that those in the parable who worked the longest did. Paying everyone the same wage feels unfair to those who had “*borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.*”

But if we can step away from our general places of comfort and privilege, how might that story feel to one of the laborers who was waiting all day – without work – and finally was chosen for work at 5 o’clock in the afternoon.

These people weren’t “*standing here idle all day*” because they didn’t have anything better to do. They were hanging around because they needed the pay – for food, for families, for survival. I see that same look almost every morning when I come to St. Paul’s, driving by the contractor’s entrance to Home Depot and seeing men waiting to be given work for that day. Going away empty handed means something far worse than what I ever experience in my day.

But we all hold an image if not an experience of personal wilderness. It may be poverty as in the original parable. It may be depression. It may be addiction. It may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death – cancer or AIDS or heart attack or stroke.

Or wilderness may be felt in how we experience the world, as opposed to our personal experience. I have the danger of falling into such a wilderness every four years when we hold a presidential election. I should be motivated by my anger and outrage over a government that has moved into pre-emptive strikes on other countries, of holding people in prison only on suspicion and without due process, of intercepting communication without subpoena, of appointing friends to positions of authority without regard to qualification, and of embracing torture as an appropriate method of behavior for us. And yet I struggle with cynicism and apathy in the midst of campaigning that, each time it comes around, seems like it becomes the lowest common denominator of lies and smears and self-interest and mud slinging. And, even worse, it works.

So, when I don’t get the immediate gratification that I want, it can help to take the long view. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. And even after all of that wandering and complaining and interceding on their behalf, Moses never got to enter the “promised land.” He viewed it from Mount Nebo (above the Dead Sea in present-day Jordan) but he died there.

When the glass is half empty it feels very unfair. But, it is possible to see it through the prism of the glass half full?

In the last chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses went alone up that final mountain and was given sort of a private viewing of the “promised land” by God. Maybe that was enough.

Maybe that in itself was a great gift. Maybe his work was over and he didn't desire the intensity of beginning a new chapter of settlement of his people as (according to the Biblical story) a 120-year-old man.

Would Moses have become such a revered figure if he had lived into that next chapter? Would Anne Frank have become the inspiration for so many had she survived the concentration camp and her diary remained private? Would any of us have the same depth of compassion or empathy if we never had to go through our own wilderness?

When we take the long view, though, we can find some comfort in seeing that change can occur. This month we have a series of bulletin inserts about the United Church of Christ Neighbors in Need offering that we will collect here next Sunday. Each insert talks about a particular local church mission initiative in response to a grant from this offering.

But what isn't advertised this year is the continuing use of this money to fund the UCC Council for American Indian Ministries. For me this is one of those "long view" ideas. When our Protestant ancestors were going about settling the United States, founding hospitals, establishing schools, and doing what they considered the "work of the church," they looked at the indigenous people already here as heathen, as "less-than," as needing to be converted or saved.

It is my understanding that each denomination negotiated with the others over which regions were theirs to "do their mission" or "save those souls." The Episcopalians got Alaska, for example, and the Presbyterians the desert Southwest. The Congregationalists ended up with Minnesota, Wisconsin, the Dakotas, and Hawaii. Those stiff-necked missionaries depicted in James Michener's Hawaii were our denominational forebears.

Over the many years since we have moved from a religious culture that very much participated in the national idea of "manifest destiny" into a culture of partnership and mutual mission. The folk from St. Paul's, for example, that have been to Little Farms UCC in New Orleans have all told us that they received far more than what they gave.

Today there are several UCC American Indian congregations in the "old territory," especially in the Dakotas, as well as a unique multi-tribal urban congregation in Minneapolis. The upcoming offering supports the ministry of these settings in some of the places that are the most poor and the most isolated anywhere in our country. Taking that "long view," it is good to see movement from paternalism to partnership. More movement can always occur, but we have come a long way down that road.

Wilderness, then, can be a physical place. It can be a personal experience. Or it can also be a gap in where our society wants to be (or should be) and where we really are. It impacts our understanding and our ability to respond. There is a motto that says: "We cannot direct the winds but we can adjust our sails." With God's help and presence, may that possibility and promise be true for us wherever and whenever our wilderness may be. Amen.

Exodus 16:2-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

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. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

Matthew 20:1-16

[And Jesus said:] "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."