

“Formed in the Wilderness”

Exodus 15:22-25; 16 (selected verses)

Exodus 20:1-17

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“Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went for three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water because it was bitter. And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

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

“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 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. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs. The Israelites did so. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed.’”

We’re deep into our series now: “Our Bible, Our Selves” – as we explore the way the Bible stories aren’t something just long ago and far away ... as we discover ourselves in the pages of God’s Word.

Last week, we found ourselves with the Israelites under oppression in Egypt. They were enslaved, their babies killed, their hopes dashed. In their hopelessness, God heard their cries, and called Moses to lead them out of slavery. After a series of plagues, at last, Pharaoh relented. By the power of God, Moses parted the Red Sea, and led the Israelites out of slavery.

Today we look at what happens next.

Now, if I were writing the script, I would probably bring our heroes to “happily ever after.” The Israelites would go straight from slavery to the Promised Land: to the freedom they desired, the place where they could put down roots, to a season where they and their children would finally prosper.

Only, that’s not how it worked. To get from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, the Israelites had to go through what’s now called the Sinai desert. The only path to Canaan, to freedom, to settlement, was through the wilderness. Which is where we find them today.

What was it like for them? On the one hand, it was glorious and wonderful: they had fled the dreaded Egyptians; after generations of slavery, they were free at last.

But on the other hand, it was dreadful: they’d gone out of the frying pan and into the fire. After three days in the desert without water, they were terrified; after more days without food, they wished they were back in Egypt where at least they ate. “If only God let us die there,” they cried. Even after all God had done, they didn’t trust that God would be there for them now. It reminds me of the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s pyramid of need: that when our basic human needs are at risk, when we feel vulnerable and insecure, we are thrown back to our basic animal instincts of survival. It is hard to be faithful . . . it is hard to trust God.

It would be easy for us to feel like this story is just a long ago tale that is instructive but remote from my life. But I’m convinced that it’s anything but that. In fact, I’ve become convinced that this story is one of the most applicable in Scripture – because all of us have wilderness stories, at some point or another.

For some people, their wilderness experience is literally one of starvation and survival, as dire as the Israelites. I think of the Syrian refugees who fled a country exploding in violence, only to find themselves struggling to find a place where their children will be safe and fed. I think of the blacks in our nation who endured slavery for generations, only to be thrust into a society where they still had no place, where they were jobless and vulnerable.

But for many of us, our experiences of wilderness are more private and invisible to the outside world. I’ve known women who have finally found the courage to flee a violent spouse – only to find herself wondering how she’s going to support herself, wondering who she even is. I’ve known alcoholics and addicts who have finally taken the first step to leave behind the slavery of addiction – only

to feel like they are stuck between the terror of slipping back to using, and the terror of life without the familiar crutch they'd leaned on.

And for most of us, we will experience the wilderness wrought by ordinary change, which is anything but normal. How many of us have known the loss of a loved one, and the wandering in purpose and meaning in the aftermath of grief: when the funeral is over and the out-of-town guests have all gone home, and you have to get up in the morning without the husband or wife of umpteen years, or, God forbid, the child you thought would undoubtedly outlive you. And how many have us known the feelings of uncertainty or even shame a young person endures in the gaping question mark of the end of college, or that any of us feel when we've lost a job and don't know yet what happens next – who we are, what our usefulness is, what will feed our sense of identity and purpose. Honestly, in our community, the sense of uselessness is a hunger as deep as any other.

The wilderness comes in many forms: whenever we find ourselves in-between what-we-once-were and what-we-will-become ... The wilderness comes whenever we have stepped away from what's familiar – for good or ill, by choice or chance – and we haven't stepped into the place where we will land.

But here's why the wilderness matters: it's not just something to suffer through. The wilderness isn't something we just have to endure. Our times in the wilderness? They can bring crucial and unexpected blessings. Our times in the wilderness? They are extraordinarily formative: *what happens to us while we're in the wilderness determines who we become.* Let me say it again: what happens when we're in the wilderness forms who we'll become. And the extent to which we allow God's Spirit to accompany us and shape us – the better-formed we will be.

Let's start by looking at what happens to the Israelites – and then let's look at present-day examples.

There are two crucial things the Israelites receive when they're in the wilderness – two things that will secure their faithfulness and well-being for every generation still to come, so long as they remember them. The first came in the Scripture we just heard: God's provision of water and manna when they had nothing they could provide themselves. There were no bootstraps with which they could pull themselves up; there was no government to rescue them; there weren't even slave-owners to whom they could sell themselves for pennies. If they thought they were dependent on God while they were enslaved in Egypt, they discovered

anew just how utterly vulnerable they were. The gift of water from the rock, and manna's dew on the land? That's what let them survive. But that gift did even more than keep them alive: that gift taught them to trust God for life itself. *It was in the wilderness that they learned how to depend on God, and God alone.* That's the first thing they learned.

And the second thing they learned? It was how to live together, what the "rules of the road" were for this new time. In Egypt, they had only known the rules of their oppressors. But now, they had no rules. In this in-between time, how would they govern themselves? What would their values be? What would motivate them for good, and guard them from evil? For this new life, for this new time, as they prepared to go to their new land, God gave them the Ten Commandments: a way of being that would guide them, not only in the wilderness, but in the culture and nation they would be destined to create. *And so it was in the wilderness that they learned how to relate to God and neighbor.* Let's turn to our second lesson:

Exodus 20:1-17

"Then God spoke all these words:

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, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath.
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.
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 – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your town. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.
5. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land 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 your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The commandments begin with loving God: remembering that God is faithful, bringing them out of slavery in Egypt; therefore they should trust the Lord, and not go after other gods or human idols, and not take God's name in vain, and practice the Sabbath so we can grow in our trust of God more than our trust in our own power. Why does God start here? Not because God needs the glory – but because God knows that in our vulnerable times, it's easy for us to panic and grasp for help anywhere we can, and in our prideful times, it's equally easy for us to take God for granted and substitute things like wealth or fame or power. It's no accident that the commandments start with our relationship with God – and with remembering that the Lord is trustworthy.

But the commandments don't end there. They immediately turn to our relationships with our neighbors: giving Sabbath to our family, to workers, to immigrants, even to any working livestock we own! That is, our love for others starts with making room for everyone around us to remember God's trustworthiness in all creation. Love for others continues with those closest to us: our parents, who gave us life itself. Then the commandments proceed to things *not* to do: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal from others, or do not even covet what isn't yours.

It is no accident it was in the wilderness that God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments. Just as God had used that time to help them become people who trust God's mercy, now God used their wilderness time to shape them into a community that extends that mercy to others.

God still works that way, right? Isn't it true that in our wilderness times, we learn to trust God more? And that in our wilderness times, we learn to grow in mercy for others? And just as they were for the Israelites, the two are closely connected: *when we trust God's mercy in our times of struggle, we are blessed to have mercy for others.*

In a wonderful affirmation of Scripture, neuroscientist Tania Singer and her colleagues discovered that all people have a natural capacity for empathy – that we literally resonate with others in their pain. Moreover, we can train our capacity for

empathy to become even more cooperative. When we feel others' pain and it blossoms into compassion, we feel concern and love and warmth, and we find in ourselves an immense motivation to help others. We are, in other words, moved not just in our hearts but in our actions.ⁱ And the converse is also true: in a study published this month in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, “an international research team now show that that a reduction of self-experienced pain leads to a reduction in empathy for pain in others as well.”ⁱⁱ In other words, *if we forget our pain, we cannot feel compassion. But if we remember our pain, we can grow in compassion.*

This came alive to me this week in an article in Friday's *Wall Street Journal*. It shared the story of the Roma Gypsies' response to the refugee crisis that's panicking Europe:

“At a refugee camp near the Serbian-Croatian border, Biljana Nikolić cradled a newborn baby, still covered with blood from birth. The infant wasn't crying. The mother, who had delivered on one of the crowded buses transporting Europe's newcomers across the border, urgently needed a doctor herself, by the look of it. So Ms. Nikolić rocked the child, calling for a Red Cross doctor.

“I was shaking,” says Ms. Nikolić, a Roma Christian. ‘The baby's family was all around me. I felt like it was the first time I've held a newborn, though I've had four myself.’

“As Europe grapples with the biggest population shift since World War II, many have reacted with fear, warning of threats to European culture and the Islamification of the continent. ...

“But the Nikolićs and other believers sprang into action Some of the Roma Christians have been involved daily, serving food, helping medical teams, playing with children and praying.”

By now you may be asking: why are the Romas responding so generously? The answer is, because of their own wilderness experience:

“The response derives from their own hardships. In the past century the Roma have been targeted by Nazi Germany and endured the Yugoslavian wars; even today many live in extreme poverty, and discrimination remains prolific throughout the Balkans. So when Roma Christians see the suffering of the refugees and migrants, they identify.

“Ms. Nikolić remembers living on the streets of Serbia with her husband and their young children in the late 1990s, not long after the war ended. They begged and struggled to survive, she says. Her two small children were filthy, she remembers,

and she feared they'd get sick, so she bathed them with bottled water she warmed in the sun. ... Prejudice meant that when the roof of their shabby home collapsed last summer, the Nikolić family struggled to find someone willing to rent to them. ... 'So we understand,' she says.

"Ms. Nikolić also knows the power of Christian charity When she and Mr. Nikolić moved back to Croatia, still penniless, a Christian couple fed them, invited them to church, and helped them find shelter.

"We said, 'Why are you helping us?'" Ms. Nikolić recalls. "We're only gypsies. No one loves gypsies." Their answer: Because Christ came to serve, and Christians must follow his example. ...

"The church's assertive Christianity sticks out in a Europe that has become increasingly bashful about its Judeo-Christian roots, preferring instead to embrace multiculturalism. But with the influx of newcomers, Europe is vacillating between gut-level humanitarian impulses and guilt-ridden cultural protectionism. Croatia's confident Roma Christians offer an alternative route.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Roma Christians: where did they get their confidence? The same place we all do, ironically enough: we gain our confidence in the wilderness: where we learn to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength ... where we learn to share the manna and grace of the Lord with our neighbors, whoever our neighbors may turn out to be.

ⁱ https://www.cogneurosociety.org/empathy_pain/

ⁱⁱ <http://ki.se/en/news/reducing-our-own-pain-is-also-reducing-empathy-for-pain-in-others>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/muslim-migrants-meet-christian-gypsies-1445556478> By

Jillian Melchior, Oct. 22, 2015 7:27 p.m. ET, *Vukovar, Croatia*