

The Beauty and Terror of the Wilderness
Exodus 16:2-15

from the first pew of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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Some of us have traveled in the wilderness. Some of us have been deep and far into the woods. Some have hiked Montana and Yellowstone. Some have seen Nebraska's Platt River and the Sand Hill Cranes in the middle of the Central Flyway. Some have hiked the Grand Canyon or wandered the lonely parts of the Appalachian Trail or sailed offshore with no land in sight. Some of us have traveled in the wilderness.

The Hebrews find themselves in a barren wilderness. They are hungry, and they are afraid. Hunger and fear spike anxiety. They've been wandering for 45 days since they crossed the Red Sea. The Promised Land has been promised, but when? where? And this may be their biggest question of all: *Will we even make it?*

Some of us have been there in the wilderness. And some of us may be there right now. Consider these singular words drawn from recent headlines: election, pandemic, fire, riot, hurricane.

Wilderness always makes us feel small.

The wilderness: A strained marriage. A sick parent. A dull job. All rocks and rutted paths and shifting, hot sand. Which way is out? Which way is up? Will we even make it?

The Hebrews were hungry and afraid. *Look Moses, if we were in Egypt, we'd be slaves. But at least there would be meat by the fires, and bread, and water.*

Look Moses, we've escaped the death of the first born. We've escaped drowning in the Red Sea. We've escaped Pharaoh's army that chased us. But now, here we are in the desert, and we're going to die of hunger?

The people are free, but they find what we all find: freedom is terrifying.

Battered spouses say this. They opt not to leave an abusive relationship. *I might be abused in this relationship, but at least I know what to expect. Freedom is too scary. I'd rather stay here in Egypt.*

People often return to less than satisfying situation not because they like it, but, because it's the only thing they've ever known. *And the only thing scarier than the known is the unknown.*

Moses . . . we're gonna turn around and head back to Pharaoh. Egypt is safer. Egypt has oppression, abuse, violence . . . and food. Egypt is familiar. And this journey you are taking us on requires too much trust, too much faith.

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We've read these Old Testament stories before. We know that God will save the day. In the mornings the land will be covered with a bread like stuff called manna. Take what you need for the day, God says; Jesus would say centuries later, *Give us this day our daily bread.*

Dew will fall for drink. In the evenings, expect quail. Didn't the Hebrew people know that God would provide? Don't we?

Yes we know, but we still are afraid. The what-ifs scare us nearly to death. *If we were in Egypt, at least we'd have food.* That's kind of like saying, *Remember the good old days? Things were better way back*

when. But we know that the “good old days” weren’t good for everybody. That’s what people say when they are afraid. They want to go backwards.

God is saying, don’t look back. Look up. God is saying, don’t get stuck in the past, be alive to the present. God is saying, you belong to no nationality. You belong to me.

We hunger and thirst for righteousness. The Promised Land has been promised, but when? where? *Will we even make it?*

Edward Abbey said that “You can’t study the darkness by flooding it with light.” If we sit in our darkness our eyes will adjust. In the deepest dark we’ll notice the stars and moon. We’ll hear the swoosh of the treetops in wind. We’ll notice the lizard on the rock. We’ll hear the quail coming into the high grass.

God stands with us when we are afraid. God gives us what we need. God hears our prayer.

Be good to me, dear Lord. The sea is so big and my boat is so small.

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Wilderness always makes us feel small. And when we feel so small, we notice God. We notice that God is so—*big, so capable, so full of love, power, and might.*

To this God be all praise and thanks.

AMEN.

Exodus 16:2-15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The 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.”

⁴Then 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. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So 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, ⁷and 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?” ⁸And 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.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“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.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When 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."