

“Finding Quail in the Wilderness”

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Will you please pray with me?

Holy God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Whenever I hear the passage from Exodus we heard today, I think of a song one of my professors from seminary sang in our Old Testament class. It's such an important song to my life that a friend of mine sung it at my ordination. I would like to play a recording of it for you now (play song).

This song captures the core message of our scripture for today, reminding us that even at the worst moments of our wilderness journey, God will show up in miraculous ways. Some of those ways might be small (like finding a dew-like substance on the ground that we can eat when we are hungry), and some of those ways might be quite significant—like finding masses of quail for dinner every night for 40 years.

But it's not always easy to live our lives trusting in those miracles. Like the heroes of our Exodus story, we might start to wonder if we had been better off where we were before. Remember our reading from last week. When we last left our heroes, they had just escaped the Egyptians. God had appeared before them as a fiery pillar and had parted the Red Sea. I can imagine the people feeling excited, hopeful, maybe a little uncertain. But, for the most part, things were looking very good. They were finally free and going to the promised land.

After a while, though, that excitement and even the hope faded. The people quite naturally started to notice how difficult this journey into the wilderness was. They started to worry that they wouldn't have enough food and water. They even started to wonder if they might have been better off in slavery. They seem to have forgotten that, just a few generations ago, the Pharaoh had ordered the slaughter of all of their male children. There's something natural in this forgetfulness, though. That horrible slaughter had happened many, many years before, and the human mind tends to forget and minimize the effects of bad government. And we can perhaps sympathize with the Hebrews. After all, their lives might have been incredibly difficult, they were not free, but everything in their lives had been certain when they were slaves. They had a place and they had small amounts of the basic necessities they needed to survive.

Humans like certainty and many of us hate change. The uncertainty that comes with change, in fact, can be so uncomfortable that many of us will accept some pretty untenable conditions in order to avoid that discomfort. I'm sure we can all think of examples of this. Some of you may know that, as a graduate student, I studied in Russia with my husband for about 4 months. This was in 1995, shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. We were there in the fall, as the country was preparing for elections and so we were able to talk to many Russians about who they wanted to vote for. We were shocked to find that many middle age people were talking of voting for the Communist party. They spoke with nostalgia of the Soviet days, not because they themselves benefited particularly from that government, but because it was what they had known. Yes, they said, there had been food shortages, their ability to buy and own products from the West was limited, if not prohibited, and travel even within their own cities was strictly monitored. But they had a steady, if low income, and a definite, if very poor, working and living arrangements. They didn't have to worry about voting for their leaders, nor did they have to figure out which policies

they preferred. Their previous life was hard, unfair, and potentially dangerous (if they got on the government's bad side), but at least it was certain.

I wonder how many of us can relate to these Russians or to the Hebrews of our story? How many of us have been in a bad situation—a bad relationship, a bad job, a bad living environment? And how many of us, given the option, were able to walk away from that, into the unknown?

Actually, the initial decision to leave might have been easy. We might have had friends or family who encouraged and supported us. It might have been easy to look at want ads or home listings, thinking that we would certainly be able to leave our bad situation. But maybe, like the Hebrews and the Russians I met, the point when we really get stuck is when we are just about to leave or when we're actually out wandering in our new wilderness. And that's when the uncertainty and change can get overwhelming. We're not sure we can do this. We're not sure we're good enough to get a new job or whether that new job or new home will actually be better than the last one. We're not sure we're able to make it on our own. We're not sure if we can succeed. Was what we had so unsure? And this uncertainty can make us turn back and accept something that we really shouldn't be going back to.

This moment, perhaps more than any in our lives, is the moment when faith matters the most. God had told the Hebrews that God would guide them out of the wilderness. And, as Virginia said last week, trusting in this guidance takes courage. God had shown them that they, at their core, were worthy of better lives, that they were loved and lovable. And just like the Hebrews, we need to hang on to this message. If something in our life is untenable or if we are called to a path different from the one, we are on, risking the uncertainty of that new path is better than staying where we are. It is better because, as beloved children of God, we are worth that better life. It is better because, even if that path gets rough, God will show up with manna and quail, supporting and nourishing us.

I felt the anxiety of uncertainty very strongly when I was first getting ready to attend seminary. I definitely felt called by God to become a pastor and I had told God I would follow that call. And, at first, I was excited and full of joy. But shortly after I had talked to my family and my pastors, shortly after I had found the seminary I wanted to attend, I started to experience a serious uncertainty because of a health issue. As many of you know, for a couple of years, I had had a mysterious illness that affected my central nervous system and the frontal lobe of my brain. My ability to analyze, my processing speed, my ability to pay attention, and even my ability to walk had all been seriously affected. I couldn't care for myself or my children. I couldn't drive or read for more than 20 minutes in a day. I couldn't walk or stand for more than about 15 minutes in a day. I had to go on disability from my job. It was awful.

It took about a year before doctors were able to diagnose the problem. I was able to undergo cognitive and physical retraining, and I got better. So, I was just getting ready to return to work and just getting ready to send my applications to seminary, when I had a relapse. At the time, neither the doctors nor I understood my illness well and didn't know how to prevent or treat relapses, though we do now. And so there I was, having decided to embark into the unknown of a new career, but suddenly just as sick as I had been before. I couldn't help but doubt my call. Perhaps, I thought, God just wanted me to think about ministry or to find a way to minister in a non-pastoral way? Perhaps I didn't really have the gifts for ministry, anyway, and I had simply misunderstood my call. Perhaps my job as a professor had been okay after all. I was unhappy and unfulfilled there, but wouldn't I be lucky just to be able to become healthy enough to return to that

job anyway? Was it really so bad where I was? The uncertainty of it all was overwhelming and I felt like giving up.

And then the quail came.

Some of you know this story because I shared it in a newsletter when I was here as an intern, but I am going to share it again now. As I was struggling with this call and my health, the scripture passage from the New Testament about the lilies of the field just popped into my head. I hadn't read it or seen it anywhere recently. It just kind of came from nowhere. "Do not be anxious," says Jesus in that passage, about the future. Just trust in God, who cares for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. That same God will care for you. That same God will not leave you alone, like a sheep lost in the fields. God will come for you and it will be okay.

I kept thinking this. I even posted on my Facebook page, "I am a lily of the field," trying to stay positive and feel comforted. And then, one day, my pastor invited me to the ordination of Ruth Fitzgerald, which was to take place here, in this church. I had been in contact with Ruth through email because she had attended the same seminary I had wanted to attend. I wasn't sure I was feeling well enough to go and I really wasn't certain that I would even go to seminary after all. But, that morning, 3 different people all asked me to attend, so it seemed like maybe a sign.

I still remember sitting in the parking lot here, thinking that I might just drive away. I was exhausted and worried, and I didn't think I wanted to be in a sanctuary full of people I didn't know. But I came in and picked up a bulletin and sat in the back. Then I looked down at my bulletin and saw an image of a lily and the words, "Think of the lilies of the field."

The service was devoted to this passage, and the pastor, who became one of my favorite professors at seminary, preached. Although I could tell that his sermon was written for Ruth and that it had a special meaning for her, it also spoke to me. No matter what happens, no matter how difficult it is to follow your call, he said, do not be anxious about what will happen next. Do God's will and the rest will fall into place.

To me, this was quail and manna in the wilderness. It was a miracle the likes of which I had never seen before and rarely seen since then. To have had that passage from scripture just pop into my head weeks before and guide me for weeks, and then to hear the exact sermon that I needed to hear, one based on that exact verse—it was as if God had shown up, literally shown up to tell me that I was, indeed, on the right path. I might have felt lost and uncertain in that wilderness. I might have doubted that I could or should keep going, and I might have thought that I should turn back or that it had been better where I had been. But God was there with me and there would be, eventually, a way out.

And there was.

"Unworthy to stand, I bow down." Amen.