

“Finding Water in the Wilderness”

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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.

Our Old Testament scripture this morning describes a familiar situation. The Israelites are STILL out in their wilderness. They are still doubting God, wondering if they should have just remained as slaves, and are complaining about and to Moses and Aaron. Isn't this the same story we heard last week and the week before? I have to admit that, when I was young, I didn't have a lot of patience for the Israelites. They had received so many miracles from God—the parting of the Red Sea, manna, quail. I thought to myself that if I was ever so lucky to receive such an obvious miracle, I would never doubt again.

I've had a lot life experiences since then and heard stories from so many others that my opinion of the Israelites has changed. Indeed, one thing that the story of the Exodus, as well as my own life experience, have taught me is that it is really hard to hold onto belief, especially when we are cast into a wilderness. And it doesn't matter how often or how grandly it seems that God has shown up for us; sometimes something just prevents us from believing or, if we still believe, sometimes something prevents us from seeing God. Water will literally start pouring from rocks when we're thirsty and we will ask, “is God with us, or not?”

As Jesus explains in our New Testament reading, water is often a symbol of life—physical life and spiritual life. The water that Moses brings to the people is meant to be understood as real water, but we can also read it as spiritual life. If we do, then we see that the Israelites are not just saying that they lack the water they need to drink; they lack spiritual sustenance. They are lost in a spiritual wilderness of doubt.

The Israelites' story can be a metaphor for some of our own. They had been hurt for so long, slaves for so long. It had seemed to them that God had been absent from their lives for a really long time. How could they trust that God, having appeared for moments in the wilderness, hadn't left them to fend for themselves?

Lots of things in our lives can cause us to have these same questions. A worldwide pandemic is one of them. Being asked to self-quarantine can cause loneliness, anxiety and depression. Moreover, as we look at Italy, where there aren't enough hospital beds to treat everyone, or we look at the United States, where there aren't enough tests for everyone, we wonder where God is in all of this.

Depression and anxiety, addictions and heartbreak, like chronic or sudden illnesses, like death and loss—all of these things can cause us to wonder about where God is in our lives. A friend of mine who suffers from chronic depression shared with me how incredibly difficult it is to sense God in the midst of his depression. His faith tells him that God is present and, intellectually, he believes that. But he feels that there's an invisible wall between him and God—one that he just can't get beyond. And he hears stories not unlike the one I told last week of God seeming to show up in other people's lives. But, honestly, that kind of story just makes things worse for him because he wonders why he, himself, can't have the kind of experience I described. If we applied his concerns to today's scripture, we could see him asking: Is there something wrong with him that he cannot see the water coming from the rock as a miracle, or that he can't see the water at all?

It is because so many of us experience these times of inner wilderness that the Exodus story is so important. Even God's chosen people, even people who kept seeing bold, amazing miracles doubted God's presence in their lives. Knowing this teaches us that we are not alone in our doubt. It helps us to understand that, as uncomfortable and upsetting as our doubt may be to us, it can be seen as common.

But the story is also important because it is an incredible testimony to the strength of the human spirit. Although the Israelites are frightened and thirsty, and although they complain, they never give up. Indeed, precisely because they ask for what they need, they get it. I am reminded a bit of the old saying, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

I don't know if my friend sees himself as courageous, but I do. Facing depression every day is hard. Despite our best efforts, depression can cause us to feel so tired, so certain that nothing is worth it, so spiritually distant. It can cause us to feel like giving up. It takes courage, tenacity and a certain amount of self-assertiveness to deal with that. My friend sees a therapist every week. He takes his prescribed medication. He insists on making time for the things that feed his soul which, for him, are music and being out in nature. He insists on time for prayer and meditation, and time with friends. He takes care of himself. And, although chronic depression can lead to a life of ups and downs, his ups are longer and longer because of his willingness to self-advocate, to practice self-care, and to seek treatment.

There are ways that his story reminds me of the woman at the well in the book of John. We can imagine what her life is like. She is a Samaritan, which means that she is marginalized and ostracized by the Jewish people. In addition, she has multiple sexual partners, which would make her a complete pariah in her society. Her entire life was probably like living in a wilderness. But despite how difficult her life was, she goes on, doing her daily chores, which includes going to the well to get water, courageously going into a public space even though people look down upon and mock her.

This woman is a bit sassy, which I love! Jesus is sitting at the well, waiting for someone with a bucket so he can get a drink. When the woman shows up, he asks for some water. At first, she gives him a hard time, basically saying, “So you and your people discriminate against me and my people and treat us like crap, but now that you’re thirsty, you’ll talk to me to get some water?” Then, upon hearing that Jesus has access to the water of eternal life, she asks him to give it to her. And, in effect, he does. He tells her who he is and, after our reading for today ends, sends her off to tell others about him so they can learn the miracles he offers, too.

Because the woman is sassy and courageously confronts a man who seems to be taking advantage of her, she gains something wonderful—not just Jesus’ teachings, but she finds acceptance in him. He could have chosen not to talk to her and just waited for his disciples to return so he could have a drink. But he reaches out to her, answers her questions, and makes her into a messenger of his good news. The woman’s tenacity, and courage, as well as her willingness to keep living through her personal wilderness allow her to get a point where she can hear and receive this good news.

Another friend of mine tells this story. She had lived a good life, working hard and building a good career for herself. Like me, though, she suddenly found herself in the midst of a debilitating disease. As a result, she had to leave her job and go on disability. Everything that she had built was falling apart and she fell into a deep depression. She wisely found herself a therapist and slowly started to try to find a new normal for herself—a way to accept who she had become and was becoming, and a way to live with her illness. She tells me that, in one therapy session, her therapist asked if he could offer an image to her of what he saw in her story. When she said yes, he told her that she reminded him of an oak, tall and strong with many branches. The oak had been hit by lightning and split at the base. At first, it had seemed like the tree would die, it had lost such a large part of itself. But, in time, the tree sprouted new branches, which eventually allowed the tree to grow in new directions. It hadn’t been the direction the tree originally had been going, and growing new branches was not easy, but it did grow. “You are like this oak,” her therapist had said. You are made of strong stuff. Your wounds might change your direction, but they will not stop you.”

My friend wept when she told me this story. Hearing this from her therapist had been like receiving water from a stone. In the midst of her wilderness journey, someone saw how hard she was working, listened to how hard she was struggling, and affirmed her courage. This vision of herself as a regrown lightning struck oak renewed her spirit, helping her to see that, even though life in her wilderness might be hard, it could still be a flourishing life.

It might be that you are struggling in a wilderness. It might be that water seems to be nowhere to be found. If that is true for you, know that God sees, hears, and knows your struggles. God sees the courage it can take to walk that path, as do many, many of us. And remember that, though the wilderness can be hard, Canaan is on the other side. Amen.