

Gifts in the Wilderness

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.

I first conceived of this sermon about a month ago, upon reading the scripture and then watching the film *Encanto*. I think you'll find that it resonates with the plight of Ukrainians now. That is well. I imagine the Holy Spirit was working through me then because of what was coming for Ukraine now. However, the sermon rose in me in response to the plight of those from South and Central America, from Haiti and Mexico. It rose in response to Antisemitism and anti-Black violence. And it rose in response to the refugees from Afghanistan. As we consider the words of this sermon and as our minds rush immediately to footage from Ukraine, please also think of these others who were so much in my mind as I prepared and prayed.

In speaking to the children earlier today, I asked them to learn the message of empathy from both today's scripture reading and the movie *Encanto*. To do that, in some respects, we need to take those stories literally. I don't often ask you to do that with stories from scripture. There can be a danger to thinking of them as real events that actually happened, instead of as metaphors that are meant to teach us. But the problem with metaphors is that they can distance us a little too much from real people and their experiences. So today, I would invite you to imagine that the story of the Exodus was real, entirely real, historically real. What would that mean for how we interpret it and how it affects us?

Maybe it will help to know that most Jews believe it was real. What must it be like for them, reading it again every year? How, do you suppose, does that affect their thinking about home, about Israel, about safety?

Many Black, Hispanic, and Latinx Liberation theologians also interpret this story as real. Why? Because if it is real, it means that

Gifts in the Wilderness

God cares about the oppressed, the marginalized, the lost, the refugee. It means that God will show up for them and actually stop and punish tyrants. It means that, while waiting through the hard times, we aren't alone. God shows up in a pillar of fire, in a voice from the mountain. It means that God provides everything we need to survive—water and food, comfort and strength, hope and light. It means that God will pursue justice, freedom, and safety for God's beloved, and that God keeps God's promises. The story can mean the same thing if it's a metaphor, of course, but if it's real, then we can feel it viscerally. If it's real, then God does all of these things, as our scripture says, "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders." What happens to your belief, to your faith, to your understanding of God, if this story is real?

We have entered into the season of Lent, a time of reflection, of penitence, of prayer. We often call it a wilderness journey, a metaphor for the way our souls wander and struggle during this time. We probably feel like our wilderness hasn't been much of a metaphor. Between the pandemic, the political tension in our country that divides families and neighbors, between the racial and social injustices in our country, and now the war in Ukraine, we are, and have been, in a type of wilderness.

Let's be cautious, though, as we think about our wilderness. What we are experiencing is not really what's described in scripture—that desperate flight from slavery to freedom, that lost wandering in inhospitable terrain, that longing for safety, for a home and being denied it at various borders. I would venture to say that most, if not everyone who is hearing this sermon, has no idea what that kind of wilderness journey is like.

But the people experiencing war, violence, horrific poverty around the world, the ones who have to flee their homes, they do. And this scripture is meant for them: "When you have come into the

Gifts in the Wilderness

land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, [you shall celebrate.] For the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and God brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

If this story is meant for them, what are we to do with it? Today, let us watch it in our minds, let us hear it, let us imagine and feel it. We do this not in order to make ourselves feel even worse than we already do. Our empathy isn't meant to cast us all into despair or make our own wilderness journey harder. On the contrary, it is a gift, meant to help us humbly step out of our own struggles and focus on the lives of others, and to focus on the greatness of God.

So as we contemplate this story, let us give thanks to the God in it. It is a story of incredible hope and love, one that encourages the refugee to imagine a future time of safety and celebration. It is a story of a God who comforts and cares for the refugee, a God who brings fortitude and strength to those struggling, a God who casts down tyrants, a God who comforts the grieving, and a God whose stories bring empathy to those who are already safe, who already have a home. Let us remember this God, trust this God, and praise this God. Thanks be to God. Amen.