

WEEK 2: Wilderness

The concept of being in the wilderness probably is a mixed bag. For some it is seen as a good thing! The idea of being able to separate oneself and get closer to either themselves or God or to just be at peace. It is a haven from either a problem or person from which you need to escape. For many the idea of Montreat might immediately enter your mind. In the wilderness our senses are heightened! Without the background noise and distractions there is nothing to dilute the fullness of the present moment. For others the idea of wilderness is terrifying. It conjures up pictures of barren desert or inhospitable terrain of some sort and almost always is a place of total isolation and one not that peaceful. Instead of a place that you go to for haven, it is more the one you are driven to against your will. It is dark, scary, lonely and full of monsters (physical and emotional). It conjures up images of Red Riding Hood in the Woods, Ichabod Crane in the forest of Sleepy Hollow or Frodo Baggins in the land of Mordor. It's also true in the Bible. While we might be able to identify a few verses where Jesus went off into what was described as the wilderness to rest and pray, the predominant themes of the stories that come to mind are negative. The book of Exodus tells us that the children of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness and the first mention of the term in the Gospels is in reference to Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. So, the Bible seems to use the term more closely related to darkness and pain than peacefulness and reflection – more of a Mordor than a Montreat. The interesting thing, though, is that God never abandoned those who were in the wilderness. This week we are going to be exploring biblical passages about the wilderness. Here are the readings we will explore if you want to get ahead and start thinking about them.

Monday

Genesis 16:7-9
Genesis 21:17-20

Tuesday

Genesis 3:1-3
Genesis 14:10
Genesis 15:22-24

Wednesday

1 Kings 17:1-15
1 Kings 19

Thursday

Matthew 4:1-10

Friday

Isaiah 35:1
Isaiah 43:18-20

Monday

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' (Genesis 16:7-9)

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness... (Genesis 21:17-20)

In these passages we find two excerpts from the story of Hagar and her time in the wilderness. Who was Hagar you might ask? Well for those of you who slept during Old Testament (and I remember who you are), Hagar was Sarah's slave girl in the stories of Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis. More to the point of why Hagar is even in the story, is that when Sarah (then Sarai) was told she was going to have a son and it wasn't happening, she decided she would take matters into her own hands. She gave her maidservant Hagar to Abraham in hopes that Hagar would give him a child. You see, in those times a child born a servant would technically belong to the master. Sarai would have a son – problem solved! When we join the story, it has just been discovered that Hagar is pregnant and scared of what Sarai might do to her and her unborn child because Sarai did not take the news of the pregnancy well. In the second passage Hagar again finds herself in the wilderness. This time it is because Abraham sent her and her son, Ishmael, away because Sarah did not like the relationship that was developing between her son, Isaac, and that of Ishmael. It seems they were acting too much like real brothers and Sarah had never viewed Ishmael as her son. In these verses, Hagar has run out of the meager provisions that Abraham had given her and again she cries out to God.

Here the wilderness is a scary place, a place of uncertainty and desperation. In both cases, God is with Hagar, but the response is different. In the first instance, Hagar is told to re-enter the situation to which she was running from, but that God would be with her and she would be blessed. In the second, however, she is driven into the wilderness against her will – she is alone, hungry and thirsty, not sure what to do. Again, God hears her and speaks to her need, this time promising to take care of her. Important to note is that Hagar does not leave the wilderness! She learns to live there, and her son grows to prosper and fulfill the promise God had made to Hagar.

When we choose to go to the wilderness, we know our reentry into that which we left is not going to be easy, but when we go back, God has said He will be with us and bless us through our hardship and suffering. It's kinda like that feeling you have when you get off the bus from the trip back from Montreat or Mo Ranch. It is good to see your family but the experience is officially over and the reality of your life comes rushing back.

What we are facing today is much more like that unknown wilderness that Hagar was driven to abruptly and without adequate supplies. Going back is not an option and God knows that. It is those moments when all we can do is take the next step forward that He is there to take us by the hand and provide a means by which we are able to move forward. Hagar does not leave the wilderness, but because God is with her, it becomes less scary and over time it is a place in which she is comfortable. It is no coincidence that the place that Hagar encounters God she named El-roi meaning "God sees".

Peace

Tuesday

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush... (Exodus 3:1-3)

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?' (Genesis 14:10)

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... And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'. (Genesis 15:22, 24)

Today's readings are probably a little more familiar than yesterday's account of Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. In fact, when you think of wilderness and the Old Testament, the story that probably comes to mind is that of the children of Israel wandering there for 40 years. What I find fascinating is that when we look at these two stories side by side there are several parallels between the story of Hagar and Moses. Both flee to the wilderness to escape something: for Hagar it was the cruelty of Sarah, for Moses it was fear of Pharaoh. Both encounter God and are sent back to the place of their conflict for purposes of carrying out some greater good: Hagar to raise her son Ishmael and Moses to lead the people out of slavery. Ironically, that mission brings them both back to the wilderness. It seems like their lives are integrally intertwined with it.

Then there are the children of Israel. While there are a great many references to their time in the wilderness, the two passages I selected are the first two mentions of "wilderness" in association with

the people. What is common to both is a response that will be repeated over and over again through Exodus and Numbers and Deuteronomy: panic and crying out to Moses to “fix it”. In chapter 14 it is an issue of personal safety, and in chapter 15 it is a shortage of food.

Now, I am not trying to downplay or lessen the real fears the people may have felt. Sometimes being in the wilderness can cause incredible panic and the situation we are going through now with the Coronavirus is no different. It can be easy to get caught up in the enormity of the situation especially when you are surrounded by thousands of others (yes there is a bit of irony in that point given social distancing). The initial panic that we saw evident in the hoarding of hand sanitizer and toilet paper that then progressed into food scarcity is no different. We all can go there in our head; I know there are times I do! What if someone in the family gets sick? What if my parents lose their jobs? What if food runs out? What if . . .

During the entire period of the wilderness, God was trying to speak to the people (His people) but they could not hear him. Many times, it was because they did not listen, but there were others, especially in the beginning where they could not hear His voice because of genuine fear and panic. They leaned on Moses every moment and every step. We often read the familiar story of the golden calf in association with the Ten Commandments as one of wicked sinfulness and idolatry. Some scholars believe it was probably more a response of panic and fear that Moses was gone and never coming back. They were scared that they would not be able to hear God's voice, then panicked and took matters into their own hands. They thought they needed a new intercessory to God. In many cultures especially the one they had just come from – Egyptian – idols were used as intercessors to God. When we are afraid, we look for the tangible, someone or something we can put our trust in and what and who we chose can make all the difference in the world.

What voice do you seek in these times of emotional wilderness? Growing up, that voice for me was Mr. Rogers'. He has a wonderful quote about a time he asked his mother the very same question and she told him to “always look for the helpers.” Their actions and words calm us. One of my helpers, and I imagine one for many Americans right now, is Dr. Anthony Fauci, a diminutive man with glasses who stands head and shoulders above everyone else as he speaks truth in scary times. I see the face of God when I listen to him talk about what we should be doing in the face of COVID 19.

Who are your helpers, your truth tellers? Listen for them and to them for they too can help you see the face of God when you might not be sure She is there.

Peace

Wednesday

Now Elijah ... said to Ahab, 'As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.' The word of the Lord came to him, saying, Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.... But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Go now to Zarephath... and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her ... she said, 'As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said... For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.' She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:1-17, selected verses)

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' (1 Kings 19:4-10)

Elijah is perhaps the most remembered prophet in all of Israel. He does not have a book in the Old Testament named after him, and instead of being known as a prophet of word like Isaiah or Jeremiah, he is known as a prophet of action! We know Elijah because there are so many cool stories about him. There is the famous battle on Mount Carmel he had with the prophets of Baal where he spoke and God consumed the altar with fire. Then there is the amazing way in which he dies – ascending into heaven on a chariot of fire!

In these passages we find that Elijah also had two instances where he was in the wilderness; however, these are different from the stories of Hagar and Moses. In the first passage Elijah flees to the wilderness to hide because God told him to do so for fear of what King Ahab might do to him in response to a rather unpopular prophesy. Elijah goes into total isolation for a period living day-to-day and once his food runs out God tells him to go to another place. He is again brought into a very dire and meager existence but through it can help a widow and her son to survive their own personal wilderness.

In the second instance, Elijah is again fleeing to the wilderness for his life. Oddly enough, the story that occurs between these two passages is the moment of Elijah's greatest accomplishment: the battle with the prophets of Baal. We quickly get to a description of Elijah's mental state: he has basically given up and just wants to die. What is curious, is that in comparison, there was nothing in the previous wilderness story that gives a hint as to Elijah's state of mind. Think about it: He is in total social isolation – no one around. He is living in a cave with nothing to do, no one to talk to. He cannot plant a garden, his job as a prophet is on permanent hold, but yet we hear nothing from Elijah by way of complaint. Then, when that place dries up, he moves along to what would not have been much of a step up but, again, no complaints and instead he becomes a comfort to others. In the second story, however, on the heels of an episode of greatness, he is ready to throw in the towel – he is done!

To me, there are two points to take away from these stories from Elijah's life. The first is that we see God present with Elijah in both instances. This is a constant in all the wilderness stories we have read. The second, though, is about isolation itself. Physical isolation can be very difficult. After a week or so the newness wears off and you ask yourself what you are going to do to pass the time. You don't feel like reading anymore, you have played the same online game now for days and have run out of good movies on Netflix!

Mental and emotional isolation, however, is a different level of pain. Sometimes, even though we feel the very real presence of God, it just does not seem to be enough. Hagar had her son Ishmael, Moses had his brother Aaron, his sister Miriam and his faithful companion Joshua. The children of Israel had each other. Elijah has no one – he is crying out to God to take his life because he is utterly alone. Now there were other people around, even others of the tribes of Israel, but his fellow prophets had all been killed – he had no community.

As we enter into multiple weeks of social distancing you are probably seeing more and more information being published in terms of how to deal with the mental effects of isolation for they can be much worse than physical hunger. Feelings of depression are going to be commonplace for so many of us as we move into the spring and early summer months. Like Elijah, you might have just experienced something great, got a 100% on a physics test – something which has never happened before – but that great feeling was gone in an instant because you could not adequately share it. Look for the signs! Reach out if you need help even if it might have to be over Zoom or Facetime. There are many people in this church family who love you and are there to support you. I know that sometimes it is important to see the face of God in another person and not just in the beauty of nature or the words of the Bible.

So what happened to Elijah you might ask? Well as you might expect, God is there for him and takes him on a personal journey of renewal and at the end of the same chapter God leads him to a young man who will become his apprentice and then go on to be his successor. Elijah finds a new kindred spirit in a young man named Elisha!

Peace.

Thursday

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered,

'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

*"He will command his angels concerning you",
and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'*

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' (Matthew 4:1-10)

Today's reading is a very different wilderness experience; that of Jesus being tempted by the devil (Satan) in the wilderness. I always found it odd how this story is set up. In chapter 3 of Matthew, Jesus had just been baptized and the heavens opened, and God said, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased!" Then the (Holy) Spirit whisks him away to be tested. Did you ever wonder why? I mean, was there any doubt he was going to pass the test? After all, Jesus is God in human form, so what power would Satan have over him?

I think what the author of this gospel wants us to focus on is the appropriateness of Jesus' response during his 40 days in the wilderness versus the total disaster of the people's response to God over the 40 years in the wilderness. Essentially, the temptation was simply to be able to "do it all, have it all, control it all". With what we are going through with COVID 19, those temptations come into our consciousness all the time. I should be able to go talk to my friends since we are not symptomatic. We will keep our distance! We all seem to pay more attention when we know someone else can relate to what we are going through even if and maybe even more importantly when that someone is Jesus. This means that God is able to sympathize with our natural desires for personal freedom and the right to choose what we want to do and when we want to do it.

The first test – stones to loaves of bread. Obviously, the appeal here is nourishment. While Jesus was divine, he was also human, and I imagine pretty hungry. In the past few weeks, we probably have all faced one or more situations where there was some item we were used to having that we now can't get. Taking that farther than just ourselves, there are many in Dallas, in the US and across the world who today are facing that same issue of so many stones but so little bread.

The second test is not really a test of ourselves so much as it is a test of whether or not God is there. In times of wilderness, or really any time of trial, we often wonder where is God. We have trouble finding His presence especially as the issue goes on and the situation seems to grow bleaker and bleaker. In those times we often lay out little tests to see if God is there. We try to make deals, pray to God and say if you do ... (fill in the blank), then I will do ... (fill in the blank), or plead with him to show up!

The third and final test – substituting something else for God. When we don't think God is there, we take the next logical step and try to fill the void with something else. Most often we do this because we want the solution on our own timetable. When we were thinking maybe the end of April, someone will tell us more likely not until summer ... it is hard to wait. The reality is that sometimes God's answer to us is "not right now". It might be awhile, but God is there listening to our prayers, never leaving or abandoning us.

Peace

Friday

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names... (Numbers 1:1-2)

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35:1)*

The final two passages for the week are not stories about specific characters, and at first read seem rather obscure. Besides having the word “wilderness” in them it is hard to see a connection between the theme and today’s scripture. The passage in Isaiah might be understandable because of its uplifting message but what is up with the first two verses of the book of Numbers?

With these passages today, we get into the meaning of the word “wilderness” and how it is used in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. There are several Hebrew words used to convey the concept of wilderness but each of the instances used in this week’s passages is the word midbar. Now what is REALLY COOL about the Hebrew language is that many words and ideas are derived from the same three-letter primitive root word. For example, the concept of Shabbat (Sabbath) comes from the primitive root meaning to cease. So when we celebrate the Sabbath we are to “cease” the work we would normally be doing. Midbar comes from the same primitive root as the word medabber which means “speaking.” Now stay with me as I go off on a tangent – I promise it will make sense!

Fundamental to Judaism is the belief that God cannot be seen. Ancient pagan religions would create idols so they could look at their gods; the Jew however hears Him. God vocalized creation into existence, He spoke to the patriarchs, to Moses, and it was through His voice that He directed the prophets.

It is in the wilderness that the Israelites hear God speaking to them. You see the words are interconnected. It is not by accident that the rabbis choose to call the fourth book of the Old Testament (Numbers) by the Hebrew name Bamidbar. In the beginning of this book we are told there is an intrinsic connection between being in the wilderness (ba’ midbar) and a God who reveals himself in speech (medabber).

It is important for us to always remember that when we are in a season of wilderness that God is speaking to us. He is holding on to us as we battle that time of isolation and despair. It is also important to note that the wilderness period for the Israelites (as well as for us) was (and will be) temporary, that there is an Exodus! We are reminded by the passage from the book of Isaiah written at the end of the Exile that out of the wilderness will spring forward renewal and rejoicing.

One last point from that obscure passage from Numbers chapter 1. Read it again! You can see why it is called Numbers in English because in the very beginning it talks of taking a census – of counting the

people. While the irony is not lost that we are starting a census in America at the same time we are in a wilderness of sorts, that is not my point! Did you notice a curiosity about how that census was done? It was not done by simply counting the people. It was done by counting the names of the people, each individual. Every single member of every clan and of every tribe was first required to record their name, their identity, from where they came, and to whom they belonged. To God, we are not numbers, mere statistics – we are known and called by our individual names, each of us unique in Her eyes.

Peace