

Sermon – “The Lord Brought Us Out”

Sunday, March 10, 2019

Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes from Deuteronomy and shares instruction given to the ancient Israelites for the conclusion of their long Exodus journey from slavery in Egypt to the land the Lord has promised them. Hear God’s word in Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

*26:1 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup> You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.”*

*<sup>4</sup> When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup> you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.*

*<sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

*<sup>10</sup> So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God.*

*<sup>11</sup> Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.*

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Luke, and tells a story of Jesus before his public ministry began, as he underwent a preparatory season in the wilderness. Listen for God’s word to you in Luke 4:1-13.

*4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”*

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.””

<sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup> for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ <sup>11</sup> and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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In a time such as Lent, during which we travel through the quieter and lonelier places, it should be said straight out that God is no stranger to the wilderness. It should be said clearly that this is so, because the wilderness is a hard place. It is the place where one feels lost in the remoteness, and as nothing in the vastness. It is where comfort is far away, and even survival is not assured.

The wilderness gives a shudder of fear...and also an incalculable longing. The human thirst for going into the wild is timeless, and it seems an odd thing that so many are in some way drawn to the wilderness to find themselves, when the wilderness is by its definition a place where you can so easily lose yourself.

We seem drawn to it, in the abstract, and sometimes in the real world, because there is a mythos that surrounds the idea of the wilderness journey. We celebrate the idea of attaining the mountaintop experience, reaching the solitude deep in the forest, surviving the passage across the muscular waves of the sea. We find it in literature and history, in some of the most compelling narratives we tell. We often tend to think of the wilderness journey as the story of triumph (or tragedy) of the individual, but there is some version of it that seems to go beyond this.

We find it embedded in both of our scripture passages for today. Deuteronomy gives instruction to the people arriving in the promised land, directing them to give a sacrifice from the first fruits of the new land, in thanks and praise and in remembrance of the one who brought them there, who delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

It sounds simple enough, straightforward enough: God brought us out! Let us celebrate and give thanks! We once were slaves in Egypt, and now we are free and blessed in our own land. It might sound simple enough that we, the listeners, forget the whole story. But forgetting the whole story is dangerous for our own hopes set on God. For the story of Exodus was not a story of abrupt deliverance; instant replacement of hardship with ease; slavery and toil gone with the sudden inheritance of a land flowing with milk and honey. It was a wilderness journey, and a long one.

Do you remember the Israelites' travels in the wilderness? They escaped from their slave masters, chased by the Egyptian army, which was then swallowed up by the sea,<sup>1</sup> and the celebration was barely even over when the hardship of the real-life trek all the way from here to there began.<sup>2</sup> Food is scarce in the desert, and water also. Supplies are absent. Safety has been left behind, and there are no maps.

Do you remember how long that trek lasted? Forty years! The people cried out to God from their enslavement, and God answered them by leading them on a journey, one where they regularly wondered aloud if they had not been better off remaining where they began.

Perhaps when we call that to mind it cuts away a little bit of the romanticism of the wilderness journey. A couple of things are clearly notable here. One, this journey was long and hard. Two, it did not come upon them as a pleasant contemplation of self-improvement, to go on a spiritual pilgrimage out into the desert to enjoy the experience of personal austerity and find their true selves and their true destination. It was shoved upon them, a trip through the wilderness at a time not of their own choosing, experienced not as mystical delight in separation from their former woes but as an actual increase in their afflictions as they entered the severity of their new landscape.

That is how the wilderness times of our lives happen, is it not? Yes, we are sometimes given the opportunity to practice spiritual austerity on purpose as a sacred ritual, for instance as Lent gives us the annual reminder to let go and seek God in the quiet places. But that is, in a way, reenactment. It is a way of keeping honed and burning away the chaff in our lives. But the big fires that burn away everything do not come of our own desire.

The catastrophic failure of a career.

The loss of a marriage.

The loss of a life close to us.

The destruction of one's major life hopes.

The failure of one's own body.

The breakdown of one's faith.

We find solitude appealing, and rest from the race alluring, but the times we actually live for real in the wilderness, for a long time, it is not usually a residency we chose to take up.

The Luke passage we read puts it in terms that might sound friendly—"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness..."<sup>3</sup> but if we look over in Mark we get a much more blunt and harsh picture of what happened here: "[T]he Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness."<sup>4</sup> It was not a vacation. It was shoved upon him, and there he faced all kinds of things: the wild beasts, the thirstiness, the loneliness, and confronted by temptations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Exodus 14.

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty and fear that they made the wrong choice actually even started before the Egyptian army was defeated—see Exodus 14:9-12. After their escape, the Israelites celebrated in Exodus 15:1-21...and then immediately hit upon the scarcity of good water in Exodus 15:22-25.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:12 (*NRSV*).

We are told of three temptations, but today I want to direct our attention mainly to the first. The devil begins by addressing him in his hunger. Jesus had been fasting for forty days. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread,” he is told. He refuses. “It is written,” Jesus answers, “‘One does not live by bread alone.’”<sup>5</sup>

This is an interesting temptation, because it might not even be apparent what would be wrong with Jesus going ahead and turning the stone to bread. His reply seems to incompletely answer things by its spiritualization of the subject matter. Sure, we might say, we do not live by bread *alone*. We may need a higher level, a spiritual level of sustenance *also*, but physical food does indeed have a very real role in sustaining our bodies. And he is, after all, the Son of God. Later in the Gospel story we see he has ample power to do such a thing. Why not?

There are probably a few answers, but here’s the one I want us to see today: consider why he is hungry for bread in the first place. He is hungry because he is fasting, and he is fasting as a part of his obedience and devotion to God. That is, while in the wilderness, he has found a path in it, a hard path, but a path on which he believes God the Father is guiding him. To turn the stone into bread is not wrong because it is wrong to use the abilities God has given him, but because it is the temptation to jump off the path that God is leading him on. The easy path can look like an awfully big temptation while in the desert, because almost every path through the desert is hard. But if it is not God’s path, it is the wrong path.

This has some implications when it comes to what we recognize now as “self-care”, which is to say, true self-care may not always look like what we think. Sometimes the harder road is the one which really takes you where you need to go. Choosing the comfortable thing is not always really caring for yourself or your truest needs.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not the hardships or the pain which are the fruits of the wilderness journey. They are shouldered while there, and our hardships are even sometimes the tools with which our souls are pried open so they might be fed, but we should not glorify the suffering itself; it is part of the journey to somewhere else.

It can be a long one. The Israelites spent a long time out there. It was made much longer yet by their own mistaken choices,<sup>7</sup> but God still brought the nation out and to its journey’s end. Our wilderness travels also are often long. But God is no stranger to the wilderness. God traveled every inch of the way with the ancient Israelites as they stumbled through the Exodus. If you have ever come through a wilderness, then perhaps the Lenten season is a good time to reflect, just as our Old Testament reading reminds us, on the places you were, and the path you took, thankfully consider how God saw you through, and pray for those who today walk the hard roads you have trod.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:3-4 (NRSV). Note that Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, where the continuation of that quote is “...but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” Also worth recognizing is that that passage in Deuteronomy, in turn, is a caution to the Israelite people about remaining humble and reliant on God once they reached the end of their 40-year stint in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup> Or, in other words, it is very easy to mix up self-care with self-indulgence, but they are not the same thing!

<sup>7</sup> See the story of the Israelites’ refusal to enter Canaan sooner, and the consequences that came from that, as recounted in Numbers 13-14, which is also revisited in Deuteronomy 1:19-45.

If you are yourself out in the lost places right now, I'll say it all the more: God is no stranger to the wilderness. The very Son of God was himself driven into the wasteland and lived there as one of us. Jesus Christ knows what it is to be in a place far away, surrounded by nothing but the vast desert, with dangers on every side, destructive voices seeking to tear him down, and no relief from the hunger.

He knows us, and loves us, and so it is not the end of the story. None of us are where we are to stay. The real world can indeed cut away some of the romanticism of the wilderness journey, but there is a reason that romanticism builds up around it in our minds. We want to get to that promised land. It beckons to us. And it might be on the other side of the desert. A book I was reading recently asked the question: "Assume for a moment that nothing transformational takes place in your inner life and character in the next ten years. How would you describe for yourself what your life will be like then?"<sup>8</sup>

I suspect not one of us would be happy to find that we did no journeying between now and then. We are drawn to the voyage, and we fear it, too, because it can be hard. But God is no stranger to the wilderness. Let us remember that during this Lenten journey, and during our passage across this life. Someday, it will be ours to proclaim on our own Easter day, "The Lord brought us out." Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Herrington, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal And Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 13.