

“The Wilderness Test”
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Text: Exodus 16:1-8
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We begin a new series this Sunday entitled “Wilderness and Wanderings.” We’ll be focusing on Israel’s journey in the wilderness as described in the book of Exodus. Wilderness is more than a place in scripture, it’s a season of formation for the Israelites. Old Testament Scholar, Terrence Fretheim, writes, “Wilderness is [not] simply a place, but a state of mind. Even more, it is a typology for the life of faith.”¹

These wilderness stories offer guidance for those wilderness seasons of our lives; those times between the life as it once was and life as it someday will be. This pandemic has us all in a wilderness of sorts. Where is God in all this? What is God doing in the midst of this? These stories from Exodus provide insight into these questions, for just as God was present for the Israelites, God is surely with us in the midst of these strange days. Our first story is of God’s provision in the wilderness, the story of the manna and the quail found in Exodus 16. Listen for God’s word to us this day:

According to Exodus, the first thing God’s people do in the wilderness is complain. The Hebrew word is better translated, “murmur” or “grumble.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve had more than my share of grumbling and murmuring through these wilderness days of pandemic. I’m over it. I am weary of these days. I miss the world as it was. Of all the things I miss, worship, as it was, is at the top of the list. I miss the energy of our congregation. I miss singing together. I miss the handshakes and hugs after worship, connecting with our faith family. Like a child on a long road trip that just keeps going and going, I find myself asking, “**How much longer?!**” I’m grumbling. How about you?

We are not alone. No sooner has their wilderness season began than the Israelites are grumbling. Their grumbling is aimed at their leaders, Moses and Aaron. They long for the way it was. Of course their memories are less than accurate about the salad days in Egypt. Nowhere in Scripture does it describe Israelites having plenty of pot roast and all the bread they can eat. What is described is enslavement, making bricks without straw, and a brutal policy of infanticide. Something about the wilderness creates amnesia about the way things really were in Egypt. **Their amnesia about the past feeds their complaints in the present.**

How does God respond to their grumbling? God provides. “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you,” God says. In wilderness seasons of our lives, the first thing God does is provide. Sometimes, God’s provision is obvious—like the deliverance the Israelites experienced at the Red Sea. Sometimes, God’s provision is a little less obvious—like frost on the ground that hardens into a flaky substance you can eat.

Scholars suggest Manna—Hebrew for “What is it?” was most likely a naturally occurring phenomenon. Apparently, there are these plant lice that feast on the sugary fruit of a tamarisk

¹ Terrence Fretheim. *Exodus in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991,) pp. 187-8.

tree. The fruit is low in nitrogen, so the lice eat a lot of it to survive, hence they have a lot to excrete. Their waste dries into a yellowish white flake, rich in carbohydrates and sugars. Its sweetness has a way of attracting ants if you try to store it, and when the sun comes up in the sky, it melts. Any of that sound familiar? Not exactly “Frosted Flakes.” Daily bread could be dried up bug juice if you’re wandering in the wilderness. I must admit evening quail sound much more appetizing. **Daily bread is defined not by content but by context. It’s what you need when you need it.** Whatever it may be, it’s God’s provision, and it’s a blessing.

How is God providing for you in this wilderness season? God has certainly blessed our church and this community through your generosity. In addition to continuing to support the church’s ministry, you have provided over \$300,000 to support our ministry partners in their efforts to provide daily bread for neighbors in need in our community. Loaves and fishes has provided over 3X their normal distribution of food to meet the needs of those whose lives have been thrown into chaos by layoffs and business closures. Crisis Assistance Ministry is responding in unprecedented ways to families in need. Roof Above has been able to partner with area hotels to provide housing for our neighbors who have no homes.

Another way we’ve put the COVID funds to work is by providing lunch every Wednesday at the Grier Heights Community Center. Dozens of children are there each day for help with their virtual learning. Not only do they get help with learning, they also get lunch—Hubee Dee’s Chicken Nuggets—a real blessing as they’re missing out on meals they usually got at school. Manna takes many forms. It’s daily bread. God’s provision in the midst of the wilderness. You have been part of all that.

How is God providing in your life? What blessings are you experiencing in the midst of these trying days? Whatever it is for you, it’s manna, daily bread. **God provides in wilderness times, and so, we are blessed.**

But blessing is not the end of the story. We are blessed, but in that is a test. God says to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you,” then God continues, “In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.” The Hebrew word translated “instruction” is “torah,” law. **Israel is blessed for a test.** Wilderness is also a time of testing.

The test question is obvious, “Will they follow my law or not?” The instructions about the manna are very straight forward. Take enough for today. Take two days’ worth on Friday. No more, no less. If we were to read on, we would see some Israelites pass that test, many do not. Some cannot trust enough to take what is needed only for one day. Some cannot trust that daily bread will come tomorrow, so they hoard more than they need for the day, and their greed results in rotten manna stinking up their tents.

“Will they follow my law or not?” That’s the wilderness test. In Exodus, the test has to do with manna. In the midst of our wilderness, perhaps the instructions are a bit broader. Jesus summarized them in a simple way. Love God with all you are; love your neighbor as yourself. How is this wilderness season testing us?

The wilderness can be a frightening place. Fear can get in the way of loving God with all we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves. In fear, we can lose our faith, lose that trust that God will provide. We can begin to believe we are sustained not by the blessings of God, but by our own

mana harvesting abilities, so we trust more in our ability to store it up than in God's blessing to provide it. In the process, we fail the test, and what was meant to be a blessing starts rotting in our tents.

Fear can keep us from loving our neighbors as ourselves. Fear can cause us to focus only on ourselves, on what we want, failing to see how that may impact neighbors we are called to love in these wilderness days. So if we don't want to observe CDC guidelines about masks and distancing and hand washing, we won't. Some call that courage, but it's really just failing to follow instructions—not the CDC's, but God's. For when the way we live our lives puts other people's lives in jeopardy, we fail to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We fail the wilderness test.

In the wilderness, God provides. That provision is a blessing. That blessing is also a test. What will we do with our blessings? Will we follow God's instructions or not? We will take only what we need? Amid the fears of wilderness times, will we love God with all we are and our neighbors as ourselves? Will faith overcome fear?

Today, in the midst of the wilderness in which we live, we take a bit of bread and a sip of juice or wine. In breaking this bread and the sharing of this cup, we believe God is with us. In Christ, in his body broken, his life blood poured out for us, God has shone amazing love for us all. What a blessing. This feast is also a test. "Do this remembering me," says our Lord. Love one another as I have loved you. Beloved, this is our wilderness test. **May we pass this test, that the world might be blessed.**