

Last Sunday we started a new series called *A New Normal*. We're looking at Israel's time in the wilderness to explore this idea that God wants us different coming out of this time than we were going in, that it can be a time to change our relationship with Him and the trajectory of our lives. I closed last Sunday by saying the wilderness is really an opportunity for us to answer God's ongoing question: Will you trust me?

It is a big question because trust is not something we easily come by. This past Tuesday during our Facebook live prayer and devotional time, I asked the participants why it's difficult to trust God. See if you can relate to any of their answers: Fear of the unknown, anticipation of pain, giving up control, having to wait on God's timing, memories of painful wilderness journeys in the past, uncertainty if what God provides will really fulfill, thinking he's going to mess with our comfort, and allowing ourselves to be distracted by other influences. I think that's a pretty good list, and a significant one to overcome.

If we are going to overcome it, it all starts with the first step, but that first step is often the hardest: going to the gym, looking for a new job, ...and trusting someone, because trust gives that person access to and influence in our lives, and God asks for both when he meets us in the wilderness. So how do we take that first step? Well, we're going to find out on the edge of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. That first step starts with:

Recognize God wants to be glorified in your wilderness.

At this point in the story, God has broken the will of Pharaoh and he has allowed the Jews to leave Egypt. They have traveled a few days, but God is about to move them to a place where their faith will be tested and their need for him will be undeniable.

[Exodus 14:1-4] Then the LORD said to Moses, ²“Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. ³For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ ⁴And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” And they did so.

The Jews were moving away from Egypt, but God tells them to backtrack to a place where they will be pressed up against the Red Sea, vulnerable, and sitting ducks for the Egyptians. But God is up to something. His desire in doing so is to be glorified, for his presence and power to be visibly manifested for both the Jews and the Egyptians to see, for his glory to be shown to his people and to those who do not know him. He wants to show he is more powerful than any force on the earth, he is a faithful protector of his people, and he will do whatever is necessary to get them to where they need to be. By the end of this episode his people will believe, and the Egyptians will be wiped out, but not before they acknowledge that God, indeed, fought for the Jews. The nations of that area will hear what happened. Word about Yahweh is about to get out.

Martha works in an industry where there are massive layoffs on a regular basis. A couple of years ago, as her company was going through a reorg, and layoffs were coming. She was speaking with a coworker and, towards the end of the conversation, her coworker said, “How are you so calm about all of this?” This woman didn't know it, but it was a question about God's

glory. Martha had been in the wilderness before, and God's glory shined as he carried her through, and she learned to trust him. She knew he would show up again if she found herself back in the wilderness. God was also glorified because Martha got to speak about how God had carried her along in past trials, that she was confident he would do so again.

Here's why God wanting to show his glory is a reason for us to trust him in the wilderness. **If God wants to show off, God is going to show up.** And he's going to show up to reveal his character to you and through you. He wants to show he is a God of grace, mercy, love, compassion, comfort, and endurance who is worthy of your trust, and he wants to show others who do not know him through you. Remember, the wilderness was to draw Israel closer to God AND prepare them to be his representatives to the world. We have that same call.

This idea can sound tone deaf. I talked to someone this week in our church who was laid off and I doubt she's jumping up and down with glee because this is going to allow her to glorify God. But, for her and for all of us who experience the wilderness, if we can pause and ask what God wants to show us in this time, we can trust that he will meet us in the wilderness and use this for good. And as he is glorified in our life, we become beacons of his glory to others when we get asked "How did you get through it?" "Why are you so calm?" "How can you be so peaceful?"

Focus on God's presence instead of your circumstances. Pharaoh decided he didn't want to let the Jews go, and he makes a move that will get the Jews attention.

[Exodus 14:6-7, 10-14, 19-20] ⁶ So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, ⁷ and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them... ¹⁰ When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³ And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." ... ¹⁹ Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

Pharaoh sent his impressive and intimidating army after them. It is a force the Jews are powerless and helpless against, and as the army draws near, the people of Israel look up, see it, and are overcome with fear. Once that fear takes hold, two things follow: **hopelessness and surrender.** They basically say, "we're dead", and that it would have been better to just remain slaves in Egypt as compared to whatever God is up to out here.

But Moses intervenes. He commands them to not fear, and then tells them how. They are to be still and see, not the Egyptian army, but God. He is their Guide, who will supply the light they

need to do what he's about to tell them to do, and their Guardian, as he moves from in front of them to behind them to protect them and keep the Egyptians away. Moses tells them to focus on him. They will see he is near, they will see he is in control, and they will see he surrounds them with his protection.

As we have moved our Sunday morning operations to our homes, I've had to get pretty handy with our camera equipment. This thing is amazing. The picture it creates is so clear, so sharp, and the more it focuses in on one thing, the more everything else gets blurry. Additionally, this thing can zoom in to such great detail that you can see pores and whiskers. We'll spare you that shot this morning.

This is what happens in the wilderness. Our senses are heightened, and we focus in on something. Whatever we focus on becomes clearer while everything else becomes blurry. You can't see it very well. And the longer we focus in on something, the more we zoom in on it to the exception of everything else. **Where your eyes go in the wilderness determines how your experience goes in the wilderness.**

We are powerless right now. We saw this virus travel across the world and show up on our shores. We have no control over what our elected officials will do, and the long-term fallout is unknown. We can focus in on those things, even zoom in by looking at hourly updates about the number of new cases in our city, and as we do, we'll grow fearful. That fear will render us hopeless and try to take us out before we get to the new normal God has for us.

The other option is to focus on God. When you do, the circumstances of your wilderness begin to blur. You will see that he is near, closer to you than any threat, more powerful than any problem, and has surrounded you with his love and comfort to keep you secure. Psalm 125 says "**As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people.**" When you see that, your fear will dissipate, and you can take a step of trust towards your new normal.

Follow God's path over your plans. God will get you where you need to go.

[Exodus 14:15-17, 21-22] ¹⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. ¹⁶ Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen...²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. ²² And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Just as things seemed hopeless, God provided a way. He told them to go forward, toward the sea, and as they did so, God parted it to make a way. It was unexpected and miraculous, and they were going to have to take a step of trust to walk between walls of water. It certainly wouldn't have been the path the Israelites chose, but it was the one God made, and it got them to where they needed to be.

I was in Israel a few years back and went to the old city of Jerusalem. You can enter through multiple gates, and a few of us wanted to get to a place that was on the other side. We could have cut through, or we could have gone around. We chose to go around and find another gate. We ultimately found an open door and thought it was a way to get in but, as we went through it and walked a bit, we realized we were not in the right place. We had nowhere to go. And right as we were about to turn around and go back, a door opened and out walked a lady who had to be between 120-150 years old. And she just stared at me. I finally spoke and said “I’m sorry. We made a wrong turn and we were just about to leave.” She responded by saying “You can’t leave.” The way she said it made the hair on the back of my head stand up, and I was pretty sure my life was about to end at the hands of a centenarian. Ultimately, she explained that we were in a private neighborhood and school, and that we had timed it just right. The doors we came through were usually guarded and they just happened to be open with no guard standing there. She said it would not go well for us if we went back that way. That meant we had hostiles behind us and a wall in front of us. We were stuck. So she said, “follow me”, and we had to trust her. Within fifteen seconds she led us down this side alley that we never would have found. It was dark, remote, and my fears of this lady wishing us ill were being strengthened. But, alas, she pointed to a wall and told us to take a left there. We did, and suddenly found ourselves in the center of the city, right where we needed to be.

Imagine the Jews stepping into the dry seabed for the first time. They probably all got really deferential: “No, you first.” “No, you, please.” They were likely terrified, ready for the water to come crashing in on them. But as they took step after step, they were likely saying “He’s really going to do this!” They took that first step of trust down a path they never could have imagined, and they discovered God was getting them where they needed to be.

We may feel stuck in the wilderness, but God is making a path for us that will get us to where we need to be. **With God, though, his solution is often to take us through the problem rather than around it.** We can take that first step in trust, even if it doesn’t make a lot of sense. An old preacher once said, “God marks across some of our days: “Will explain later.”” That’s fitting for the wilderness. But absolute clarity won’t be necessary when we are secure in God’s presence.

For many of us, we have been running down a path that we had all figured out, but this disruption may be making it a dead end or showing us it’s no longer the path God wants us on. He is opening a new path for you, and you may not see totally where it’s leading, It may not be where you were headed, but you can trust it’s where you need to go.

How are your actions in this wilderness demonstrating your beliefs about God? This is a question about God’s glory showing in and through your life. If you observed your own life, would you see a person who is preaching the gospel to themselves regularly? If others who did not know Jesus observed your life, what would they be able to tell about the God you worship. Would they see evidence of Prince of Peace, the God of endurance, a nursing mother, and the Spirit of hope and joy? Take a step of trust and let God’s glory in.

How will you focus on God’s presence? If the antidote to fear is to focus on the presence and power of God, entering into that presence is vital in these times. The noise of the world seems to

make it to us on its own, but if we want to focus on God, that takes intentionality. We are in a season of prayer, and I want to encourage us all to get into the daily rhythm of praying twice/day; a time in the morning to ask God to be in the middle of your day and dedicate the day to him and again in the evening to review the day with him and thank him for how he moved. We want to help get you started. From tomorrow through Saturday, we will be on Facebook live at 7 AM and 7 PM to lead you through a short devotional and spend some time in prayer. It will be for a few minutes, and we pray it gets you into a rhythm.

Where do you need to change course? This is a question that may not get answered in the first week of your wilderness journey, but it's a good one to ask regularly. The Jews were just starting out here on the banks of the Red Sea, and you may be in the same place. It's possible that God, in his grace, is simply taking you one step at a time, and you may not see your destination for a while. I would encourage you, as you take each step, to hold the plans you have more loosely. You may be on the exact path God wants you, but he may also lead you in a different direction. Remember he will be with you the whole way.

At the end of this passage, we're told the Jews saw the power of God, feared him, and believed in him. It all started with the first step of trust. That first step is so important because it becomes the anchor of our faith. Over the next 1,200 years, the rest of the Jewish Scriptures will be filled with dozens and dozens of references to the crossing of the Red Sea and the faithfulness of God. Time after time when they struggled to trust, they pointed back to this moment and remembered the God they worshipped is infinitely trustworthy.

This may be the time where you take your first, or your new first, step of trust and anchor your faith in the faithfulness of our God. It literally has the potential to impact the rest of your life, to become your new normal. And when the wilderness shows up again, and it will, you will be able to point back to the spring of 2020 and say, "this is where I learned to trust the Lord", and he showed himself to be faithful. He will do it. Let's give him the chance.