

The Promise of the Wilderness
Exodus 16:1-12 , Matthew 4:1-11
First Congregational UCC, Asheville NC
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Over the past few weeks as I have been thinking and praying about the circumstances here at First Congregational, a couple of images kept coming to mind: waking up in the middle of a night not knowing where you are. There are no lights anywhere and you're trying to figure out how to navigate terrain that is unfamiliar and not illuminated. How do you move forward? Where do you dare to step? What is out there than you don't know about? As I told the children, this is when it helps to have "someone with skin" to hold you, take your hand, walk with you so together you can navigate and face whatever is awaiting.

And yet another metaphor that occurred to me is being lost in the wilderness. Perhaps as you're hiking around here. Or maybe when you're driving somewhere new or because of a detour. Or maybe because your life is a mess and you can't figure out which way is up, as they say. I'm guessing most of you have had wilderness experiences.

And they can be scary—especially if you don't have sufficient resources like food and water and shelter—and you have no way of knowing how to get out of the wilderness or accessing the resources you need. Being lost in a strange place is disorienting and frustrating, to say the least. I don't know about you, but for me one of the worst feelings in the world is being lost. Where do you turn if there are no signposts or they're all in a language you don't know? And you have no map, or GPS, or even a compass? How do you know if you're moving in the right direction and getting closer to your destination or moving farther away or going around in circles? What happens if you don't figure it out before nightfall, or before your water runs out, or before whatever time that appointment is you're trying to get to? And what happens if you're with a group and there are at least two people who think they know the right way to go...but no one is absolutely sure about where you are at the moment...and so it's pretty darn hard to know if you should turn right or left at the next intersection.

I'm actually thinking of a time a couple of years ago when I was traveling to Lancaster PA with a group of students in the Pastoral Leadership Development program, that I was director of. These are all adults over age 40, and we were traveling in 2 cars, one following the other. I was the navigator for the lead car and as we approached the Washington, D.C. area we hit a huge traffic jam. I started using my phone to find a faster way around D.C. Meanwhile the driver was using his car's GPS system for directions, too. I guess, it's not exactly what you'd call wilderness, but for us it sure felt like it! I finally recognized some landmarks and realized we weren't where I thought we were, so we pulled off to confer...and get something to eat and drink. As we sat at the table, I was trying to get an overall sense of where we were and the possible routes to Lancaster, so I asked both drivers for a map. Neither had one. Someone scurried off to a nearby gas station to try to buy one. No luck. So there we were in the midst of Interstates and state highways, fast food chains and strip malls, feeling for all the world like we'd never get to where we needed to be and wasting lots of good time trying to get there. I don't know when I've ever felt so frustrated—I mean how do you NOT have a map in your glove compartment?—or felt so lost. And I can't even begin to guess how the people riding in back

seats must have felt. After all, I was their leader and I didn't seem to know where we were going! Does any of that sound familiar?

If not in your own life, if not in the present circumstances of this congregation, certainly that must have been how Moses and his people were feeling. Moses was leading a huge band of recently released slaves out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, into the Promised Land. And then they started running into all sorts of glitches and detours and seemed for all the world to be lost. And the people riding in back seats were scared and frustrated and wanted to turn back because there were no fast food places to stop and get food and drinks and look at a map. According to the text that we just read they'd been traveling for more than a month through the desert and this was their 7th major stop, and the 3rd time we read about them complaining. They don't know it, but we do because we've read the story or seen the movie: they've got 40 years to go, many, many stops ahead, and lots more complaining to do.

Now here's what's fascinating and important about this story: it's THE seminal story of the Jewish faith, that is the Exodus, their deliverance from Egypt but most of the story is about how they wander in the wilderness for 40 long years. And when the Gospel writers created their narratives about Jesus and his ministry 3 out of 4 of them started with Jesus in the wilderness as well. It's important to note that even though the Israelites tended to blame Moses for their travails, it was God's idea to take the long and winding road to the Promised Land. And it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness at the outset of his ministry.

Wilderness may sound to us like a frightening, frustrating place to be, but in the Bible more times than not, it's where people meet God and have profound spiritual experiences. Moses' first direct encounter with God was while he was out chasing sheep and a certain burning bush caught his eye. Then there's Jacob who was running away from his brother Esau, camping out in the wilderness with only a stone for a pillow and God sent messengers—angels—up and down a ladder to bring him a special delivery messages. Likewise, Elijah was fleeing for his life and went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat under a juniper tree and asked God to just kill him then and there. Instead God sent angels with food and drink, and instructions to keep going into yet another wilderness.

Wilderness is where the Israelites wrestled with God, experienced God up close and personal, and learned their true identity. It's where they were tempted to stray but then they came back, they were given laws that directed their communal life so that when they finally entered the Promised Land they knew who they were, that is no longer slaves, and they know how to live together as free people in healthy, faithful ways. Likewise Jesus, immediately after his baptism where he's identified as God's beloved child goes into the wilderness where he learns what that means: living solely by God's rules, not the world's or Satan's tempting aggrandizements.

Wilderness. We've all experienced it. We may feel like we're there now. And these stories can give us good ideas about what to do and what not to do while we're traveling through it:

First: Don't lose hope. Remember God tends to meet people in the wilderness. Don't yield to temptations, easy fixes, and short cuts. Remember how the Israelites grew so impatient with Moses and God that they decided to throw away all their valuables to create a false idol, the

golden calf? That didn't end well. And Jesus could've given in to temptation, but instead he was true to his identity. As a result the angels whom Satan had promised to give him, came and ministered to him of their own free will. So stay true to who you are, and to the faith, values, and traditions that have brought you safe thus far.

Second: Go ahead and complain...but direct your complaints to God. In other words, pray and wrestle with God. I am always slightly amused by the number of good Christians who think they can't ever complain about or yell at God. But when I read the Bible I see people complaining to God all the time. And guess what? God answers them! In fact this whole Exodus adventure got started because, the text says (Ex. 3:7f) that God heard the people's cries and knew how they suffered and so, God told Moses, "I have come down to deliver them." And in the passage we read today from Exodus 16, God listens to the people's complaint that they had no food or water, and God points out how they can catch quail and gather dew and manna so they have something to eat and drink.

Which leads us to a third thing: Don't get so caught up in your fears and frustrations and sense of dislocation that you fail to see all the resources that God has provided already. As Biblical scholars point out, the manna, the water, and the quail were already there as part of God's creation, but God had to calm the Israelites down long enough to see them. Wilderness can seem like a threatening place, but with the right perspective it becomes a nurturing place.

Fourth: If you need "someone with skin on" to complain to or share your fears and frustrations, or even your hopes and dreams, come see me. That's one of the main reasons I'm here with you. Like Moses I will not make it with you to the Promised Land because my role as an interim is by definition temporary but I'm here with you now to listen and learn and help lead.

And finally, hang in there and hang in there together! Wilderness journeys can take a long time. There are detours and setbacks and temptations to resist and avoid. But here's the payoff: When the journey is over, we may not arrive at the destination we thought we would, but we will have a much better sense of who we are, who God is, where it is God wants us to be, and what it means to walk together by faith.

And don't forget to keep an eye out for angels!