

Grumbling About Blessings
A Sermon on Exodus 16:2-15
Proper 20
September 24, 2017

Introduction

When we think of wilderness today, we think of a place like Rocky Mountain National Park. It has hiking trails that are well-marked with signs, and friendly animals. It has rivers that you can see by hiring a raft for six people and taking a four-hour float trip. Arbuckle Wilderness has a zoo that you drive through. You drive along a trail and see all the animals from your car. Wilderness is a vacation place for people who like the outdoors.

That is very different from what wilderness symbolizes in the Hebrew Bible. It is not a romantic, idyllic place. It is a lonely, deserted place.

The Hebrew slaves have been liberated from Egypt and will spend the next 40 years in the wilderness. Their time in the wilderness takes up the second half of Exodus and all of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It is where God will prepare them to become a new people. a people of faith.

First Move: Wilderness as Beyond

Wilderness in the Bible is an uninhabitable place. It is the chaos that the world looked like before God created order out of chaos. We shouldn't confuse wilderness with the Garden of Eden, where God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. Wilderness is full of dangerous wild beasts that Jesus encounters during his temptation. Wilderness in the Middle East also describes a desert. There is nothing to eat. When Abraham sent Hagar and her child Ishmael into the wilderness, Hagar cried out to the Lord before she could not bear to watch her young son die from lack of food and water. In Deuteronomy 8:15, Moses describes "the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions."

The Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar*. It can mean that which is desolate and deserted and that which is beyond, beyond settled farming communities, beyond the reach of government. Wilderness is untamed by humans.

There is much in nature that is strange and alien to us. Wild, untamed nature is not our friend and it is not a source of healing for us. The editors of a preaching

commentary for the Season of Creation remind us that stars are swept into black holes, tsunamis swallow ships and flood coastal cities, rats spread plagues in cities, and mosquitos in tropical swamps bring smallpox and malaria to children. We have seen earthquakes and hurricanes bring devastation to people in Texas, Mexico, the Carribean islands and Florida. Weather events are part of a wild, untamed nature.

Wilderness is also a place of continuing creativity. The primary wilderness areas today are jungles, tropical rain forests, barrier reefs and Arctic tundra. They are teeming with biodiversity. Most of the species of plants and animals known to science live there. New species are continually being discovered and continually being created.

The fundamental religious emotion is awe and wonder. We experience it in the presence of something that transcends us. Wilderness by definition for the Hebrews is something beyond. Many of us have been to the mountains and the ocean and felt that sense of awe and wonder. But our mountains and our beaches are not true wilderness. Most of us have never been to uninhabitable places. We have never confronted the Behemoth and the Leviathan in their native habitat. We see them only in cages at the zoo and the aquarium. We have never tried to survive in the desert. Few of us have tried to strike a trail through a rain forest.

Perhaps that is as it should be. Today we would be too tempted to use our technology to tame the wilderness. We would create a Jurassic Park, an amusement park where people could see dinosaurs. But dinosaurs by their nature are wild and uncontrollable. We convert the wilderness into something else by domesticating it.

Second Move: Bread from Heaven

The sons of Israel, the people of Israel, are in the wilderness—away from the fleshpots of Egypt and the seductions of Egyptian culture and empire. By calling them the sons of Israel, the author of Exodus identifies the people as the descendants of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel after he wrestled with the stranger at Bethel. They have a common ancestor but they have not yet become the nation of Israel.

They have been liberated. Now comes the even more difficult task of creating a new society that will allow for more freedom and be more egalitarian. This is hard. The tendency is to create a new form of despotism. We have seen it repeatedly throughout history. There is a revolution to overthrow a tyrant. The Jacobins and Napoleon replace the king of France. The Soviets replace the Tsar. Colonial dictators are overthrown in Latin America and replace by native-born dictators. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

The new form of government that God creates in the wilderness is a theocracy. God is the source of all authority and speaks through Moses and Aaron. The people are not yet a people of faith. They have witnessed the mighty acts of God, the ten plagues that God brought down on Egypt. Yet they still do not trust God. They are unwilling to recognize God's authority over their lives.

That says something about how hard it is to have faith. This is the generation that has Moses for a leader and saw God part the Red Sea. Yet faith is a new thing for them. They had not been worshiping Yahweh. Moses tells God at the burning bush, "I will come to the Sons of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.'" Yahweh is not their God, but the God of their fathers. They do not even know his name. Now they are totally dependent on this God who is new to them.

The whole community of the Sons of Israel complains to Moses. Their grumbling about being liberated reveals a low level of spiritual consciousness. Nahum Sarna, a Jewish scholar, says they are behaving like spoiled children.

God does not get angry. God hearkens to their grumbling even before Moses has a chance to bring their complaints before God. God is a model for political leaders. Their authority must be respected before they can lead. God earns their respect by providing for their material needs.

God uses this as a teaching moment. God provides instruction to help the people deepen their spiritual consciousness. Instruction is a translation of the Jewish word, Torah, which means instruction, teaching, law. The people receive instruction even before they receive the Ten Commandments.

God says, "I will rain down upon you bread from heaven." This bread nourishes their souls as well as their bodies. God provides for their needs each day. The manna will come with the morning dew. Manna occurs naturally in the Sinai desert. An insect lives on the sap of the tamarisk bush. The sap is loaded with carbohydrates. The insect eats the sap and secretes the excess sugar each morning onto twigs. It coagulates into wafers. It is sweet and sticky and edible. The wafer melts in the heat of the sun and attracts ants.

Each man is to go out at daybreak each day and glean the food himself, enough for everyone in his tent. Gleaning makes them dependent on the mercy of someone else. This will help them remember when they are settled and God has given them their own land to farm that they are to leave the edges of the field for gleaning by the widow, the orphan and the resident alien. They are to take only enough bread for the day. They are not to hoard any of it. If they do, the bread will rot—it will be filled with worms and maggots by the next morning.

God also provided meat for them. At sunset each day a flock of quail flew in and covered the camp. Quail migrate each year in large flocks from Europe to central Asia. They leave each spring and return each fall. It is a long flight and the small quail get exhausted. They land in the Mediterranean basin to rest. They are easy to catch when they are on the ground. Quail meat was a delicacy. The people were eating extravagantly in the wilderness.

These are natural events that have a supernatural element. Manna and quail are available naturally only for a few weeks each year, but God provides manna and quail to the people for 40 years.

God is testing them, whether they will walk according to God's Torah or not. God says to Moses, "If you hearken to the voice of Yahweh your God and do what is right in his eyes, giving ear to his commandments and keeping all his laws, all the sicknesses which I have imposed upon Egypt, I will not impose upon you, for I am Yahweh, your healer."

God also gives instruction on the institution of the Sabbath. This is the first time that the Sabbath is observed in the Hebrew Bible. The men are to gather a double portion on the sixth day and do no work at all on the Sabbath. That is a time for rest and for worship.

Will the people hearken to God when Pharaoh did not? God says, "When you eat flesh at sunset and bread at daybreak, you shall know that I am Yahweh your God."

Yahweh establishes a new society: Each person is dependent on God, each tent has enough to eat, there is no hoarding of possessions, a day of rest is built into the work week. Each person looks to God for guidance.

Moses and Aaron tell the people that they should be filled with gratitude and worship God. "Present yourselves before God." Literally, "approach the face of God." It is a standard expression for going to the sanctuary to come near to God and offer worship.

Third Move: The Role of the Church

People grumble a lot today. We grumble about politics. We grumble about the cost of health care. We grumble about injustice. What else do we grumble about?

We grumble even though we have been richly blessed. We have freedom. We have shelter. We have plenty to eat. We are wealthy and privileged. All of us in America consume more than our share of the world's resources.

We grumble about the church, that it is not reaching more people, that it engages in partisan politics, that it is not welcoming to all people, that it is not faithful to the gospel.

Before we start throwing too many stones, let's remember that the church has brought us blessings, too. Most of us grew up in the church, and even if we leave for a while as young adults, we come back to the church. The church at its best energizes us every Sunday and sends us out into the world as disciples of Christ. We feel like we are missing something if we don't come to church on Sunday.

The church has a checkered past, but it also has told the stories of Jesus to generations of Christians for 2,000 years. It just hasn't spent enough time imitating Jesus.

It would be a good thing for the church to spend some time in the wilderness. John the Baptist called all of Judea to the wilderness to repent of their sins and be baptized. That is where the Christian movement started. We could get back to doing what the church is uniquely suited to do: build spiritual consciousness.

We are citizens of heaven, not heaven as someplace in the sky you go after you die, but heaven as a present reality here on earth when we develop our inner self, what Thomas Merton calls our True Self. We recognize the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society, we cannot expect all people to recognize the Lordship of Christ, only the church.

We have ambivalent feelings about power, especially political power. Jesus relied on persuasion not coercion. We never see Jesus in the gospels forcing anyone to do anything. Where there was no faith, Jesus had no power to work miracles. We still cannot imagine what a society would look like that does not rely at least in part on coercion.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God more than anything else in the Gospels. I used to see it as a political utopia, where everyone has enough, where all people treat each other with respect. Now I believe it is more than that. I agree with Jim Marion, a Catholic mystic, who says that the kingdom of God is realized whenever we put on the mind of Christ. It is when the hearts and minds of all people are transformed—they have the spiritual consciousness of Christ. The task of the church is to help us reach consciousness at that depth. That journey takes a lifetime.

The church can help us understand God's instruction for us today. The church can teach us the stories in the Bible and the traditions of the church, especially the mystical tradition. The church can help us look at the world from a spiritual perspective. We worship an invisible God whom we cannot see unless we look with the eyes of our soul. Then we see the sacred all around us, running through all things.

We will be filled with gratitude instead of grumbling. Karl Barth, the great German theologian of the early 20th century, said that the basic human response to God is not fear, not guilt, but thanksgiving.

The gospel rejects the idea of entitlements. Christians believe that we are surrounded by goodness; it is all a gift from God.

God also gives instruction through science. Robert Emmons, a psychologist, writes in *Thanks! How the Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, that gratitude has two parts: we recognize that there is goodness in our lives and we acknowledge that the source of that goodness lies outside us. Being grateful pulls us outside ourselves and opens us up to the goodness that surrounds us. It pulls us into relationship with others as we acknowledge that we are dependent on others and they have made our lives richer. It pulls us into deeper connection with nature as we appreciate the beauty and bounty that surrounds us.

Conclusion

God provided for the people of Israel in the wilderness by giving them bread from heaven. God opened their eyes to the food that was available to them in the desert—the manna that was produced by insects feeding on tamarisk bushes and the quail who were resting on their migration to Asia.

Bread from heaven feeds our souls as well as our bodies. It is instruction from God that opens us up to the beauty and abundance all around us. We can stop grumbling and praise God for the blessings that have been showered upon us.

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