

# *Sermon at March 26, 2019 Meeting of the Hudson River Presbytery*

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***Exodus 16: 1-4** The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”*

*<sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.*

Our friend and colleague Cari Pattison is on the Appalachian Trail. I am following her posts on Instagram and marvel at her fortitude. Myself? I could never do such a thing, but I think about it—being in the wilderness. Sometimes wilderness is a place we choose; sometimes it is thrust upon us. Wilderness can come with loss, or change, or transition. Sometimes wilderness is a place deep within us. And sometimes it is all of the above.

Wilderness calls everything into question, and it is a place every single one of us will go, in one way or another.

So. Here we are, in this season of Lent, in this season of the wilderness. We can hear about wilderness, we can read about the wilderness, we can even worship around wilderness, but being in the wilderness? That’s another story. And I am totally with the Israelites when they begin to say, “If only . . . .” How many times have we said that?

If only we had checked the tires. If only we had not taken the “short cut,” or tried that new dish, or taken that last drink . . . or said *those* words. If only we had not gotten out of bed or left the house at all, which is where we find the Israelites.

And they are indeed dramatic words, and serious. This is not the first time the Israelites have complained. Life has been terrible for a long time; the hardship of slavery has not been eased by Moses. In fact, he makes life harder for them at first by requesting three days for them to go and make sacrifices to their God, so that Pharaoh declares them lazy and orders them to make bricks without straw. They say to Moses, “You have brought us into a bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

There by the shores of the Red Sea, they cry out in fear, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

There in the wilderness, this place between the known and the unknown, where nothing is certain, nothing except hunger and thirst and their tired, aching feet, they say, “If only.”

If only we had not come. If only we had not dared to dream of freedom. If only we had not believed you, Moses, or trusted in this mysterious God whom we cannot see. Because this is too hard. What lies ahead we cannot see for the dust and the glare of sun and *we have no idea how or why we are even here*. What we do know? We know the way back. It's easy. We just turn right around and trot ourselves back to the place that we can almost convince ourselves was not really so bad.

Remember that even Egypt was not originally not a bad thing; it was life and salvation for Jacob and his family during a time of famine and need. It's just that they got too "numerous," Look, the new Pharaoh says, "the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come; Let us deal shrewdly with them. . . ." The Israelites weren't doing anything wrong. They just got too big.

Following God's call is like that. It's not that the old vocation is wrong or bad, you may just be called to grow beyond it.

The wilderness can be a struggle of months, or years. A few years ago, I knew it was time to leave my congregation, but I mourned, I denied, I bargained, I questioned. I didn't know what lay ahead; I got a glimpse of a next step forward, but not the whole path. I knew the way back, though. It was so clear. I could just keep on, convincing myself that this stirring in my heart was not so important, that it wasn't really so bad to feel tired and drained and have this free-floating sadness that I could not name. I sat in Spiritual Direction with a brother at Holy Cross monastery and could not for the life of me articulate what I wanted. I said, "I only know what I don't want." And looked at me and simply said, "It's no longer your vocation." I burst into tears. I had not allowed myself to know that vocation could change. Besides, what else was I good for? And every time I am tempted to go back to what I know, God gives another gentle shower of manna. Just for that day. I can't store it, or hoard it, or even keep it. It's just enough for one day. Will I follow God's instruction or not?

We know the way back. Notice, though, that the Israelites amidst all their complaining are not punished.

My Greek preceptor at Seminary, Elna Solvang, now professor of Religion at Concordia College, writes this about the Exodus passage:

“. . . to condemn the Israelites for complaining in Exodus 16 would be to introduce a judgment that the text itself does not make, sending the message that complaint has no place in life with God.

This, of course, is not true. The laments in the Book of Psalms give voice to the human experience of abandonment, suffering, fear, and danger. The complaint that there is no food, the fear of the present, and the longing to be back in an earlier time are not constrained to the pages of Exodus. The situation is the same for the world's poor today, and they are joined by increasing numbers of people losing homes, jobs, health care, pensions, dignity, property, and savings in the wake of global economic turbulence.

Exodus 16 offers the assurance that the wilderness of want is not a God-forsaken time or place. As Moses instructs Aaron to say to the Israelites: "Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining" (16:9)."

I have to confess that I am still in this wilderness, often just getting enough for the day, and I am not very happy about it.

So how do we move through?

Christ calls us to come into the wilderness and then to stay with him there. If you think about it, most of Jesus's time spent renewing himself is in one lonely place after another. It's there that God speaks. It's there that strength, and vulnerability, come. It's there where we reach the limits of our own resources.

I keep a sign on my desk that says: *The life for which /you have been so carefully prepared /is being taken from you/ by the grace of God.*

Letting go: that's what we are called to do. We give up things for Lent.

Once I told my friend Melissa I was giving up swearing for Lent and she laughed herself almost into an asthma attack.

In the book "The Secret of Letting Go," by Guy Findley, he writes:

"The truth is that letting go is very simple and, above all, natural; as natural for you and me as it is for a tree to shed the heavy, sun-ripened fruit that clings to its branches. Why? Because both man and tree, in fact all living things, are created to drop what is no longer needed. For the tree, the falling fruit carries its matured seed to the ground. No unnatural force is necessary. In a similar fashion — that is to say, under higher but equally exacting laws — these same friendly forces are waiting to do for you what you haven't been able to do for yourself. You need only learn to cooperate with these powerful and timeless principles to be able to let go of any emotional bitterness, relentless regret, anxious worry, or troubling thought. The rest will be done for you.

It's not easy, nor often very enjoyable. The good news is we are allowed to complain, to be angry, even to say, "If only . . ." We are even allowed to go back; we know the way, after all. But that's not where God is calling us.

We can complain as much as we need to. Many years ago in my early twenties I was seeing a therapist, dealing with the death of my father when I was a child. He said I was having a hard time letting go of my anger. (What?) He said, "Get a whiffle ball bat and find a tree and hit it until the bat is broken." I suggested that this was rather extreme, that I didn't need it, that perhaps he should do some more reading, and he paused and said, "Yep. Maybe you need two bats."

Whatever and however we practice letting go, we do it because it enables us to say yes to what God has intended for us. The wilderness is real. And we are sometimes so, so lost. And hungry. And complaining, and in despair.

But notice God's response. God doesn't say, "Tell those whiners to stop complaining," Or, ". . .After all I've done for you so far?!" Or, "Have a little faith." No. God says "I am going to rain bread from Heaven for you."

I am going to rain bread from Heaven for you.

And each day you shall gather enough for that day. Just enough for the day; not to store, not to hoard, not to keep. Sometimes the manna doesn't look like we think it should. (Did I mention that I've been in the wilderness for two years?!) Last week I was rushing around getting ready to go to my office job, and I meant to listen to the radio to get the weather report, because I had a really busy day, and I was already feeling a little frazzled and anxious and rushed, and well, you get the picture. So I

yelled out to the Echo Dot, “Alexa! Play W- “ but the call letters of the station went right out of my head. I couldn’t remember them. And Alexa said, “Playing Michael W. Smith. My Place In This World.” I stood, still, listening to him sing: “Looking for a reason / Roaming through the night to find my place in this world, my place in this world. Not a lot to lean on / I need Your light to help me find / my place in this world, my place in this world.”

I wiped the tears away: said, “Alexa. Stop.”

Manna. Just enough for the day. Not to store, not to hoard, not to keep, but to give, and live and share and know God’s abundant blessing.

At this Table, this is the Bread of Heaven that we gather into our souls- not to hoard, not to store, not to keep, but to give and live and share and know God’s abundant blessing.

The Bread of Heaven for those who are grieving and in despair- come, and be fed.

The Bread of Heaven for those who fear- there’s a place here for you.

The Bread of Heaven for you who hunger and thirst for righteousness- Christ calls you here.

For those who are still holding on and longing for what was, and who are not too sure what God will do? Come, all of you.

This is where we let go of what we know; stepping into the wilderness, in the company of Christ who calls us, to see what God will do. We begin again here, and the sermon closes here, with a poem by Jan Richardson called “Beloved Is Where We Begin.”

If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.

Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.

Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.

I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you

from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.

But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.

I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.

I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

Amen.

Preached March 26, 2019  
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