

7.23.06

Living Faithfully in the Wilderness Numbers 11:1-15 14:1-11

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

How many stories have been written, movies made, and TV series produced about people being lost - lost in the woods, wilderness, desert, sea, or on an island? The list is almost endless. Robinson Crusoe, The Last of the Mohicans, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Gilligan's Island. Lost in Space, Lost. Castaway, Alive, Homeward Bound - the Incredible Journey. Even the musical Into the Woods. Some stories have a happy ending, some end tragically. Sometimes people emerge with remarkable stories of surviving and overcoming, other stories will never be known. We are drawn to these stories in which people cope with life at its most basic level of survival in difficult circumstances in the wilderness without losing heart or hope, without giving in to fear but holding on to faith.

Today's book of the Bible is largely a story about trying to live faithfully in the wilderness. The English title, "*Numbers*," comes from the Greek (Arithmoi) and Latin (Numeri) translations based on the numbering or census of the people of Israel that is described in chapters 1-4 and 26. I like the title in the Hebrew Bible which calls it "***In the Wilderness***," referring to the long period, traditionally regarded as 40 years, that the people spent in the wilderness. This was not the people's finest hour of faithfulness. Again and again the people complained, remembering in an idealized way the relative security of slavery in Egypt compared with the precarious insecurity of life and freedom in the wilderness. Human beings have an incredible skill called selective memory, what the Israelites remember is a glorious menu of food they used to eat and not the fact that they were slaves. In the wilderness there were power struggles among the leaders, raising the question of who speaks for God, there was even dissension in Moses' own tribe, the tribe of Levi, over his leadership. One revolt was instigated by his own brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam (Num. 12), others would rise against Moses later (Numbers 16). It was a tough time for everyone, Moses at times was ready to quit. There were crises that caused the people to question whether God was with them in the present which seemed so difficult or could guide them into the future. Despite the people's blindness and rebelliousness, God was faithful to the promises made to Israel's ancestors. The second lesson today is from Numbers 14:1-11:

Then all the people began weeping aloud, and they cried all night.

2

Their voices rose in a great chorus of complaint against Moses and Aaron. "We wish

we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!” they wailed. ³ “Why is the Lord taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and little ones will be carried off as slaves! Let’s get out of here and return to Egypt!” ⁴ Then they plotted among themselves, “Let’s choose a leader and go back to Egypt!”

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell face down on the ground before the people of Israel. ⁶ Two of the men who had explored the land, Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, tore their clothing. ⁷ They said to the community of Israel, “The land we explored is a wonderful land! ⁸ And if the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey, and he will give it to us! ⁹ Do not rebel against the Lord, and don’t be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the Lord is with us! Don’t be afraid of them!”

¹⁰ But the whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb. Then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared to all the Israelites from above the Tabernacle. ^{*} ¹¹ And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will these people reject me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?”¹

In his book, *Walking the Bible – A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, Bruce Feiler relates his experiences as he sought to follow the journey of Moses and the people of Israel. Feiler describes the desert wilderness this way, “**Light**. The first thing you notice about the desert is the light. The second thing you notice about the desert is the **space**. The panorama is almost overwhelming, with sand blowing across the ground, bushes bent against the wind, and everywhere rocks, mesas, dunes, and mountains. The last thing you notice about the desert is the **noise**. In preparing for this part of our journey, I steeled myself for the silence. But once I stepped into the open terrain I was amazed by the din – the wind whining through the mountains, the sand tinkling against your face, the rocks beneath your feet.

**The desert destroys affectation; it demands authenticity.
Come with a vague sense of identity; leave with a deeper sense of self.”²**

* Numbers 14:10, Hebrew *Tent of Meeting*.

¹*Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. 1997 . Tyndale House: Wheaton, Ill.

² Bruce Feiler, *Walking the Bible – A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, (Harper Collins, NY, 2001) p. 199-200.

I think Feiler is correct about the desert and its role in shaping God's people, whether collectively as in Numbers or individually as we see with others in the Bible and in life. The idea of the wilderness as a place of transformation has deep roots in the Bible. **The desert wilderness is a place of spiritual testing and growth. Moses** first met God in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt after committing murder. **The Israelites** spent many years wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus having their faith tested and refined. In the New Testament, **John the Baptist** emerged from the wilderness preaching about the need for repentance, for all people to turn their lives around and to turn them over to the Lord. It was in the wilderness where **Jesus** wrestled with his vocation to be a Messiah who would do God's will and even suffer and die for the sins of others. In the wilderness Jesus provided food for those who were hungry.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, many Christians sought spiritual refuge and insight in the Egyptian desert. Henri Nouwen writes the following about the desert wilderness: "The desert – the Egyptian desert but also our own spiritual desert – has a double quality: it is wilderness and paradise. It is wilderness, because in the desert we struggle against the "wild beasts" who attack us, the demons of boredom, sadness, anger, and pride. However, it is also paradise, because there we can meet God, and taste already His peace and joy." It is in the wilderness that we discover that "Reclaiming our true self requires a total transformation. It requires a long and often slow process in which we enter more and more into the truth, that is, into a true relationship with God and, through Him, with ourselves."³

It is in the wilderness that we learn our utter dependence on God, the one who delivers us and strengthens us for the challenges of life in a new land, in a new phase of our lives. For each of us, we may be led into or enter a wilderness period at any point in our life, quite often for reasons beyond our control. Being in a spiritual wilderness is as Nouwen described about the desert both a scary place and a land of opportunity. When we are in the desert of grief, loneliness, despondency, or fear, the difficulties may make us wonder how we can even go on or survive. **The key thing to do when we're in the desert is to remember to remember the right thing.**

The Israelites remembered, but what they remembered was a small piece, not entirely accurately about the variety of their diet. What they didn't remember was all the Lord had done for them that enabled them to live to see this day. God says to Moses

³ Yushi Nomura, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers*, Introduction by Henri J.M. Nouwen, (Image Books, NY, 1984), pp. xii-xiii.

after one more day of people complaining, *“How long will these people reject me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?”* When we focus on what we don't have any more that we miss, it may cause us to miss what we still have. Obviously when someone we love dies, we miss them every single day. However, if that is all we think about, we will miss life and those we love who are still present. The Lord wants us to remember not just the past and what is gone, but to remember all the Lord has done for us because that is how our faith is built and strengthened for the unknown days that lie ahead for all of us.

There is no easy way to get around the hard truth that it is important to keep on believing even when life is difficult and it is easy to be fearful. One descendent of Moses (Joshua Loth Liebman) put it this way, *“We master fear through faith – faith in the worthwhileness of life and the trustworthiness of God; faith in the meaning of our pain and our striving, and confidence that God will not cast us aside but will use each one of us as a piece of priceless mosaic in the design of His universe.”*

When we find ourselves afraid in the desert, remember that life is worthwhile—even if we have moments when it feels like it isn't. God can be trusted – even when we find people sometimes cannot. It is worth giving faith a fighting chance and when we do, it may be the key that unlocks the door to meaning in the midst of our pain and struggles. Never lose confidence in God who will not cast you aside and who will stay with you even in the wilderness when life may seem to be at its worst.

Yesterday John Smack facilitated a day long gathering for the Advisory Council where we talked about the ideas in Jim Collins book *Good to Great* and the implications of some of those ideas for BBC. In that book, Collins relates what he learned in interviewing Admiral Jim Stockdale who was the highest ranking United States military officer in the “Hanoi Hilton” prisoner of war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. He was tortured over 20 times during his eight-year imprisonment from 1965 to 1973. Collins conversation with Stockdale influenced him profoundly. He wrote, “Life is unfair – sometimes to our advantage, sometimes to our disadvantage. We will all experience disappointments and crushing events somewhere along the way, setbacks for which there is no “reason,” no one to blame. It might be a disease; it might be injury; it might be an accident; it might be losing a loved one; it might be getting swept up in a political shake-up; it might be getting shot down over Vietnam and thrown into a POW camp for eight years. **What separates people, Stockdale taught me, is not the presence or**

absence of difficulty, but how they deal with the inevitable difficulties of life. In wrestling with life's challenges, the Stockdale Paradox (**you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end and you must also confront the brutal facts of your current reality**) has proved powerful for coming back from difficulties not weakened, but stronger."⁴

I think that is good advice for us when we're in the wilderness. We have to acknowledge the brutal facts of what our reality is and face them head on and yet hold onto faith that with God's help we will get through it. Ernest M. Wadsworth wrote, **"Pray for a faith that will not shrink when it is washed in the waters of affliction."**

When we're in the wilderness you have a better chance to make it through if you have good survival gear. For Christians, our survival gear includes a good knowledge of the Bible and of God's promises to God's people. Prayer which we can do any time, any where to talk to and listen to God whenever we wish but especially when we feel like there is no where else to turn. The presence of the Spirit of Christ who will not leave us or forsake us helps us to have faith as we struggle forward one day at a time. The company of friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, who will journey with us through the desert so that we are not in fact truly alone helps to ease our burden. Holding on to faith rather than fear is absolutely vital. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was right when we said, *"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."*

We hold onto faith by remembering all the Lord has done to preserve our life to this very day. None other than William Shakespeare wrote,
**"God's goodness hath been great to thee;
Let never day or night unhallowed pass,
But still remember what the Lord hath done."**

We don't have a desert on the Cape, we do have the beach and that is a place many of us go when we are "in the wilderness" and in need of a word from the Lord. Recently Rick Porter was going for a walk on the beach and he wrote me an email about his experience.

Hi Doug,

⁴ Jim Collins, Good to Great (Harper Business, NY, 2001) pages 85-86.

When I go to Lighthouse beach in Chatham, I walk out a mile or two on this 7 mile beach. This day as I placed my stuff down and prepared for my run I was overwhelmed with the beauty surrounding me. I began to pray and quickly realized that I had become envious of others. Instead of looking at the blessings and miracles in my life I was dwelling on things that I didn't possess. I had become ungrateful of God's work in me and my family's life.

I began to change my mindset. I asked God to forgive me. I called Joanne on the phone to share my experience. As I talked to her I was walking at the waterline. I glanced down to see a blue mark on a white shell. I dug out the shell . It had LOVE spelled out on one side, as I turned it over I could not believe it. BE GRATEFUL was written on the other. Joanne could not believe it either. I half expected to look up to see a plane towing a banner that read, "This means you," and an arrow pointing to me.

I now believe that (I was) much like the Israelites who had been slaves but were now free, they were still acting like slaves. Not realizing the freedom given to them was a gift. I too was a slave to sin but my acceptance of Jesus had freed me. But my ungratefulness was bringing me back into slavery. I look at this shell every day to remind me of God's wonderful blessings in my life. I give thanks to whoever placed that shell on the beach; he or she was doing God's work."

The reality for most of us even after we begin a relationship with Jesus is that (Abraham J. Heschel) "**Faith is not something we acquire once and for all.**

Faith is an insight that must be acquired at every single moment."

Every moment we are choosing whether we will live out of fear or faith and that choice has significant consequences. Lewis L. Dunnington wrote,

"Fear builds prison walls around a man and bars him in with dreads, anxieties and timid doubts. Faith is the great liberator from prison walls. Fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages, fear sickens, faith heals; fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith sees beyond the horizon and rejoices in God."

Every tomorrow has two handles. We can take hold of it by the handle of fear or the handle of faith.

Prayer: God some of us are deep in the wilderness today, we're fearful and scared. Help us remember you are with us in the wilderness times and when all else is lost, the future still remains. If we only have a vague sense of identity, of who we are; when we leave this worship service, as we move through and out of wilderness times in our lives, may we leave with a deeper sense of self and a deeper relationship with you. Help us to meet you, and to taste your peace and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.