9-13-20 Through the Wilderness: God is With Us Rev. Amy Haines

Ex 14:19-31 Confirmation Sunday

The story of Exodus is the central story of the Jewish faith. It is a story of salvation—how God brought God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and sent them on their way to the Promised Land.

Yet before the people of Israel could set down roots in that Land, they spent a generation wandering in the wilderness. It was a time of transition. It was a time of uncertainty. It was a time of learning to trust God.

Over the next three weeks, we will hear and reflect on three significant stories from these wilderness wanderings. All three stories remind us that God guided them through the wilderness, and God will guide us as well through whatever we will face in life.

Today’s story comes from Exodus 14:19-31, when Israel was camped in the wilderness beside the sea, and Pharaoh decided to pursue them to regain his country’s slaves. Caught between water and chariots, listen to how God made a way through the wilderness.

--read scripture--

When the confirmation class first met with Mariel and I last November, no one expected this year to be like no other. We began in person in the music room. Then we moved online to Zoom. We began mentoring in Zoom break out rooms. Then we moved mentoring outside to the noisy side lot of the church.

Our youth have had to get creative in how to serve others. They’ve worshipped online with their families. They’ve met with other youth online for study and fellowship. Like all of us, they have had to adapt and be flexible to actively participate in the community of faith.

Every year in confirmation, we talk about the image of a journey. For each and every one of us is on a journey through life, and within our life journey is our journey of faith.

Any journey implies movement. From one place to another by car, plane or train. From one perspective to another by considering a new train of thought. From one way of living to another through intentional action. We cannot embark on a journey and remain where we are, or even who we are. For journeys change us. We are changed by who we meet, what we experience, and how we respond.

In January one of the first confirmation exercises completed in their student books was a visual map of their faith journeys. Some maps were linear, a timeline of churches and events. Some maps were more meandering, reflecting a faith that is sometimes strong and sometimes weak.

Confirmands, now I encourage you to add to your faith journey maps whatever would represent for you the year 2020. Parents and mentors, brothers and sisters in Christ,

If you were to visualize your faith journey in 2020, what might your map look like?

Would it look more like a straight road, or more like a mountain switchback? Would it be overshadowed with darkness and struggle, or shimmer in light and hope? Would it be represented by a community of faith cheering you on, or represented by a lone traveler?

Would it include all of the above, depending on the moment you are depicting from your journey?

There is no doubt that 2020 has changed us. In what ways we have been influenced by this change, however, is still to be determined.

Yet no matter how the maps of our faith journeys have changed this year, no matter if today we are on the mountaintop celebrating with Jesus or today we are struggling through the dark valleys of life, our scripture from Exodus reminds us of a dependable promise woven throughout the Bible—God is with us.

God is with us--

Through the wilderness

Through the waters

Through 2020

Throughout our journeys of faith

Notice I did not say God is with us to pull us away from the wilderness or to protect us from the deep waters. Notice I did not say God is with us on a road that is smooth and straight rather than winding and full of potholes. While that may be some of our experiences, more often than not our experiences are instead the good news that God is with us through our wilderness wanderings, through our struggles as well as through our celebrations.

Trusting in God does not exempt us from the tragedies of life. Following Jesus does not mean that we will be always be blessed with abundant health and wealth and power and prestige.

We will face times of joy and times of sorrow, times of hope and times of despair, times of doubt and times of faithfulness, times of struggle and times of faith.

Yet, through it all, God is with us.

God is with us as God was with our faith ancestors. God was with Abraham and Sarah, with Joseph and Moses, with the Israelites in the wilderness, with the exiled remnant returning to Jerusalem. God was with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth. God was with the disciples sent out 2 x 2 and the disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit. God was with Paul on his missionary journeys and with all men and women down through the centuries who have boldly and quietly lived for Jesus.

Confirmands, God has been with your mentors and with your parents and with all who physically and spiritually surround you today in that great cloud of witnesses.

God is with all of us here today in our celebration of Confirmation and in the bread and cup of Holy Communion. God is with all of us amid the systemic struggles and health issues that will define 2020. God is with all of us even as we feel a mixture of hope and uncertainty for the future of the church.

As Bishop Palmer proclaimed yesterday in the virtual West Ohio Annual Conference—*Do not be afraid--God is with us!* While that theme was chosen over four years ago, its message is spoken time and time again throughout the Scriptures. *Do not be afraid—God is with us!*

Yet, how often do we still give in the fear? How often are our lives still filled with uncertainty?

How often do we doubt that God is truly with us?

We are not the first to struggle with our hope and fears and faith. Imagine the uncertainty and hope that the people of Israel experienced in the midst of their wilderness wanderings following the Exodus from Egypt.

Having been slaves in Egypt for generations, God worked through Moses to demand of the current Pharaoh, “let my people go.” Yet while the Israelites were thankful to be leaving Egypt behind, they had no idea what the future held, or even where they were going. They knew God was guiding them by a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day. Then one night the Israelites camped beside the sea as they began to wander in the wilderness. And Pharaoh decided to come after them, with hundreds of his best chariots. Would the Israelites continue to trust God to make a way? How would God protect them in that moment?

God protected them by moving the pillar of cloud from in front of them to behind them. Then God made a way through the wilderness when God instructed Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea. A mighty wind blew upon the water and the water parted. Not only did the water part, the Israelites walked through the water on dry land.

Can you imagine what the people of God must have been thinking in that moment? Death was chasing them down. God didn’t stop the chariots from advancing at that time. Instead God made a way forward. Can you imagine the fear and faith the Israelites felt stepping onto that dry seabed, walking between walls of water, trusting that God would still protect them?

Can you imagine the grief and relief they felt when standing on the other side, watching the walls of water close back in on all of Pharaoh’s chariots? They marveled once again at all that God had done.

Yet God was just beginning. And their journey through the wilderness was just beginning.

They still had to choose to trust God not only with their present, but also with their future.

They didn’t know it at that time, but they had many miles and many years ahead of them, wandering in the wilderness and trusting God provision. Yet, God was with them.

And generations later, God continued to promise to be with God’s people. From the 43rd chapter of the prophet Isaiah:

The promise of God to us is clear:

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (Isaiah 43:2).

When you pass through…there I am, God declares. With you I will be, God reassures.

This is still true for us today, as individuals, as a congregation, and as the church universal.

When we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness, not able to go back, but uncertain of moving forward, God is still with us. Whatever struggles and pains and celebrations we pass through, God will still be with us.

Throughout every chapter of our faith journeys, God is with us.

God is with us when our journeys begin in the waters of baptism, where God claims us with unending grace.

God is with us when our journeys are shaped and formed by the community of faith who surrounds us—parents and mentors, siblings and teachers, friends and other Christians.

God is with us when our journeys continue in joy when we claim Jesus as our Savior and our Lord.

God is with us when our journeys are renewed each time we share in the bread and cup of holy communion, reminding us we are forgiven and freed for new life.

God is with us when our journeys bring us together for worship and prayer and study and service.

God is with us when our journeys encounter both celebration and sorrow.

God is with us when our journeys are shaped by our baptismal and membership vows to renounce, reject and resist evil in whatever forms they present themselves.

God is with us when our journeys bring us together to share our gifts and skills, our passions and possibilities with the church, community and the world.

Our journeys will look different from one another, yet may they all show a trust in God, a faith in Jesus, and a willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Especially when our journeys take us in a different direction than expected.

The people of God held as slaves in Egypt never really expected to be set free. Then, when they were set free, they never expected they would have to walk across the sea.

Then, when they crossed the sea, they never expected to wander in the wilderness for an entire generation. Yet, even as they wandered in the wilderness, they lived in the hope that one day they would finally move into the Promised Land.

If we try to map out now what our future journeys will look like, we’re only guessing, like a GPS that is constantly recalculating and surprising us with where it wants to take us. A detour may take us onto a new chapter of life and faith. A new opportunity may change the direction of our lives and our ministries.

How many of our youth here today know exactly what they want to be doing in 10 years? *Anyone*?

How many of our adults here today are where you expected to be when you were dreaming and planning 20 years ago? *Anyone*?

The direction of our lives may change in an instant.

The one who is with us throughout our lives, however, will never change.

…In John Perkins’ memoir, *Dream with Me*, the civil rights leader describes how a life lived with God can change very suddenly, and what was seemingly impossible can become possible.

He wrote:

How in the world did I get here? The only answer I know to give is that these things can happen when you walk with God. It’s easy to look at a person—to see where he started and how far he has come—and think you know how the story will end. But I’ve learned what Saul learned on the road to Damascus: when God’s involved, everything can change in an instant. You may think you know where you’re headed, but often God has a different plan.

-John M.Perkins, Dream with Me, Baker Publishing Group

-thepastorsworkshop.com:journey adapted

This is the message the wanderers in the wilderness have for us today—trust that God is with us, and trust that God will guide us, and trust that God cares for us out of God’s deep love for us.

So today, whether you find yourself wandering in the wilderness, resting beside still waters, or struggling in the midst of the storms of life, give thanks that God is still with you. Give thanks that God is still with us.

Thanks be to God for the gift of his presence always. Amen.