9/26-27/20 Through the Wilderness: Possibilities for Living

Ex 17:1-7 Rev Amy Haines

The book of Exodus tells the story of the people of Israel as they move from slavery to freedom,

from commands to expectations, from trusting no one to trusting God.

Much of their journey was spent wandering in the desert wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. For a generation God guided them through the wilderness, and their story informs our stories,

reminding us God will also guide us through whatever we face in life, including 2020.

Two weeks ago we heard the story of their miraculous crossing of the sea, how God made a way through the water as the people of God began to journey through the wilderness.

Last week we heard how God provided food in the wilderness, and how God continues to invite us to trust God’s provision and presence and grace.

Today we hear how God provided water in the wilderness, and in so doing continued to invite the people of Israel to a life of joy and possibility rather than grumbling and complaining.

As we listen to their story may we also hear God’s words to us today.

--read scripture--

Have you ever played a version of the sponge race? It’s an easy and fun relay game to play with children and youth, especially on a hot summer day.

The first person on each team has a sponge and a bucket of water. At the end of the line is an empty bucket. The goal is simple—be the first team to fill your bucket of water—using only the sponge to transfer the water from one end to another.

I’ve played this game where each person runs the sponge to the other end of the field to squeeze out as much water as possible, and I’ve played this game where the sponge is passed from person to person down the line until it gets to the bucket. On the run, you lose water dripping from the sponge. Down the line, you lose water when each person squeezes the sponge.

Typically, by the end of the race, both teams are laughing and are often very wet.

Parents, if your children are bored this afternoon, try this race as a family. Any sponge and bucket or even a cup will do.

But imagine then trying this race for a second time—and using a rock instead of a sponge.

Would that ever work? How can you get water from a rock? It’s impossible!

Yet, that is what Moses did in our scripture story today!

For months, the people of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness. God freed them from slavery in Egypt, and set them on a course to the Promised Land. But that course was never a direct route. They did not know it at the time they set out, but this journey would take a generation to complete.

For along the way, they had to learn how to trust in God.

They had to learn to trust God’s guidance by following a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They had to learn to trust God’s care as God provided daily manna and quail for sustenance. They had to learn to trust God’s presence even as they complained.

In today’s scripture, on the move again, now between the Desert of Sin and the Mount of Horeb, the people of Israel made camp at Rephidim. Yet at that camp there was no water.

Nothing to drink. Nothing to feed the livestock.

Have you ever been so dehydrated that all you could focus on was your thirst?

The people of Israel once again complained. They began to quarrel with Moses. They began to look back again to Egypt rather than trust the God who was always present with them.

When Moses spoke to God on their behalf, he also began to complain. His frustration and fear were evident in his words to God. “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

Once again, God ignored the complaints yet heard the needs. God instructed Moses to take his staff and some of the elders as witnesses, until they arrived at a rock from which God would pour forth water. Yes, a miracle of water from a rock.

The inclusion of Moses’ staff is a significant detail. This ordinary shepherd’s staff had been a sign of divine power time and again throughout the Exodus. This is the same staff that in Exodus 4 was transformed into a snake when Moses was concerned that no one would believe his story. This is the same staff that in Exodus 7 turned the life-giving Nile into a deadly canal of blood. This is the same staff that in Exodus 14 parted the sea and gave the Israelites a way forward, away from the chariots of Pharaoh. Once again in Exodus 17, Moses’ staff became a sign of divine power. This time, by giving water from a rock.

Moses struck the rock, and water flowed.

That place was renamed Massah and Meribah, or testing and quarreling, so that in future years the people of God would remember their grumblings while also remembering God’s grace.

The people kept asking, “Is the Lord really with us or not?” (v7) They tested God when they only believed if God would satisfy their needs. They needed to learn to trust God even if those needs would not be met.

God was still with them—in pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. God was still with them—through manna and quail and water. God was still with them—guiding them to Horeb, where God first called Moses from a burning bush, and where soon they would be given God’s commandments

as directions to live with God and one another.

God was with them. Yet, they continued to put God to the test.

How often have we found ourselves doing the same thing, especially in this crazy year? If you’re really with us God, then prove it. End our divisions and violence. End our fear and uncertainty.

Bring us back to normal.

We want God to be the genie in the bottle, responding our demands. We want God to be the vending machine God, who answers all of our prayers in the way we expect them to be answered.

But that is not the way God works. God won’t give in to our demands for proof. God will show up in our lives, if we are open to seeing God within us and among us and around us, in often unexpected ways.

God isn’t miraculously ending our divisions. Instead, God is calling us to understand one another’s fear and hurt and frustration. In listening to one another’s experiences, God calls us to live into our commonalities rather than our differences.

God isn’t miraculously easing our fears. Instead, God is inviting us to not live in fear of the other, whoever that other may be. Instead, God is inviting us to live into the ways we can positively impact others, to live into ways that honor and value all people rather than give into our fears of those who are different than us.

God isn’t bringing us back to the way things were. Instead, God is inviting us to move forward in faith, choosing what needs to stay and what needs to go in our lives. Can we let go of greed and live instead by generosity? Can we let go of priorities that harm our families? Can we move beyond selfishness to care for others, truly living by love for God and neighbor?

Like the people of Israel, we are not called to be known by our grumbling and complaining,

our quarreling and testing. Instead, we are called to be known by our faithfulness and trust,

our worship and our praise. Yes, we will still experience some wilderness wanderings in our lives.

Are we open to God’s presence with us through the wilderness? Are we open to God’s call guiding us through the wilderness?

Today, God is calling us to more. To thrive rather simply survive. To choose gratitude rather than grumbling. To choose joy in all circumstances. To see possibilities rather than scarcity.

In the Greek language there are two words for life. Bios means “mere biological existence” whereas Zoe means “life in all its fullness.”

-adapted from Stuart Briscoe, I Believe, thepastorsworkshop.com:life

God is calling us to a Zoe life rather than a Bios life. To live fully rather than simply to go through the motions of living. To thrive rather than survive.

Throughout Exodus’ stories of wilderness wanderings, we rarely see the people of Israel offer thankfulness for God’s tangible gifts of presence and protection, of manna and water. We read story after story where they grumble rather than be grateful.

If someone to write down our story, would it be a story of grumbling or gratitude? How often do we express our thankfulness to God? How often do we share our stories of thankfulness in community? How often do we witness to what God has done and continues to do in our midst?

..Author Leo Buscaglia often re-told the story of his mother’s "misery dinner." The dinner occurred the night after his father came home and said it looked as if he would have to go into bankruptcy because his partner had absconded with their firm's funds. His mother went out and sold some jewelry to buy food for a sumptuous feast. Other members of the family scolded her for it. But she told them that "the time for joy is now, when we need it most, not next week." Her courageous act rallied the family.

*--Christopher News Note*s, August, 1993, adapted, sermonillustrations.com:joy

Joy is an emotion that isn’t always tied to happiness or success. Rather, joy can be contentment or delight in the moment, regardless of our circumstances. Joy can be experienced when we live into the fact that God is always with us.

Think back on your journey of life throughout this past week. Do you remember more your limitations or your possibilities? Did you focus more on your scarcity or your abundance?

Did you live more by faith or fear? Are you learning to trust or still struggling not to test God?

How we view our wilderness wanderings will often determine how we navigate through them.

Are we open to the possibilities still ahead of us, or focused more on what we’ve missed along the way?

Are we ready to trust God and “strike the rock” to allow water and grace and hope to flow through us, or do we still balk at God when God asks us to do what is seemingly impossible on our own?

Today, consider how you can “strike the rock.” As one pastor wrote:

“Strike the rock” means lean on God, trust in Jesus. Strike the rock means find the joy even in difficult moments, even in the wilderness. Striking the rock is trusting that there is a way forward even when it seems like there is no way. Striking the rock is a declaration of faith,

even when it seems like giving up makes more sense. When we gather week by week,

in person or online, with our worshiping community, we are striking the rock, …choosing to worship the God who is with us.

--adapted, umcdiscipleship.org “Strike the Rock” 9-27-20

Thank you today for striking the rock, for being open to God’s possibilities for living, even as we may be restricted in our movement. Thank you for considering how to respond to life with grace rather than grumbling, faith rather than fear, hope rather than despair.

As the words to the hymn “When We are Living” remind us:

‘Mid times of sorrow and in times of pain,

When sensing beauty or in love’s embrace,

Whether we suffer, or sing rejoicing,

We belong to God, we belong to God. (UMH #356 v3)

This month, we’ve only reflected on three snippets from the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel in the desert. There is so much more to their story, which I invite you to read and reflect on this week.

And while you reflect on their wilderness wanderings, give thanks that God is still present with us, guiding us through our wilderness. As you reflect on their struggles of faith, remember the promises of God’s presence, providence and possibilities, promises for our faith ancestors long ago as well as for all of us here today.

As we continue to move through the wilderness that is 2020, may we choose to be grateful,

choose to be faithful, choose to live in fullness as our responses to God’s ongoing presence with us.

Strike the rock! Trust in God! God is with us! Thanks be to God.