

**11th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**August 5, 2018**

Text: Exodus 16:2-15  
Theme: The Wilderness

It is called a wilderness experience. It is a time of distress, doubt, and alienation from God. We attach these experiences with the wilderness because that is the place where water is scarce and where humans are rarely seen. It is where wild animals wander in search of their next victims. In a spiritual wilderness God is seen as distant or absent and unresponsive to our needs. As a result we feel alone, vulnerable, and unprotected.

It is also the place where Satan loves to reside because it sets up the perfect scenario for us to be tempted away from God. Satan loves to watch us do our own thing, follow our own will, and lean on our own strength. And when we fail and/or our lives just start to fall apart then some will start to question their faith and some will even question the very existence of God.

How can a loving God allow such things to happen?  
Where is God when we need him the most?  
What will God do to let us know he is still out there?

I have been to Alaska which contains some of the largest wilderness areas in our country but I was not there long enough to experience its scarcity. Next summer one of our mission trips will be in the open spaces of northern Minnesota. I assure you our youth will not suffer any undue distress.

However, I do know what it is like to be in a spiritual wilderness. It happens every time an unexpected, traumatic event takes place in my life. It is the sudden death of people I care deeply about, the broken relationships that at the time seem irreparable, and the past memories that cast these dark clouds over me. Kate and I were talking this week about how when our children hurt (no matter their age) then we hurt as well. It is the kind of days when we say to God that enough is enough because we are not sure how much more we can take.

Remember how shocking it was when the writings of Mother Teresa were published after her death. In her own words she wrote – *Jesus has a very special love for you but as for me; the silence and the emptiness are so great that I look and do not see. I listen and do not hear. My tongue moves in prayer but does not speak. I need you to pray for me.*

These few words are the best example (I could think of) to describe this arid place called the wilderness. Mother Teresa (small in stature but known for her rock-solid faith) had the courage to voice what some of us want to say but we are too afraid to write it down or speak of it aloud. We have the opportunity today to hear from God what God does in the wilderness. Even in the darkness God never leaves us alone or stranded.

Remember! In all of Exodus God accompanied the people of Israel for the entire time they wandered around in the wilderness. God provided a cloud to lead them during the day and God made a pillar of fire for them at night. And God did much more than light their path. The people were hungry so every day God rained manna and quail from heaven. The people were thirsty so every day God provided them with water.

Sometimes we see God as distant or absent and unresponsive to our needs when that is not the case at all. What is more accurate is that God may not respond as quickly as we would like or God may not respond in the way we want. But we cannot afford to let our thoughts turn to fear or doubt or despair because when we do ... it only gives Satan a foothold in our lives. When we read passages like the ones we are given today God wants to renew our confidence in him. God wants us to hear that he will be with us and he will work good out of anything we experience in this world.

And what I most love about the lesson from Exodus is that it makes it very clear that keeping our trust in God is to be a daily exercise. Brilliant on the part of God! At twilight they were given quail and in the morning manna rained down from heaven. But they were only instructed to take as much as they needed for that day. For those who were trying to save some for the next day (other than the Sabbath) it turned into worms and became foul.

We need God on a daily basis and not just when we are in a crisis. Every day God promises to rain down his blessings upon us and God promises to take care of us but there are times when we look and do not see. We listen and do not hear. It is at such times that we can turn to our faith community and ask them to pray for us.

Our manna comes to us in the form of his Word and the more time we spend studying his Word the more we will hunger for God through Christ. And the more we hunger for God through Christ the more our souls will be sustained and nourished. And the more our souls are sustained and nourished the more we will be strengthened as his words sink deep into the driest places of our spirits. We will be given the grace to start walking through the wilderness confident that we are not alone and that we will not be there forever.

In that precarious place called the wilderness, the Israelites learned to trust God and to believe in his goodness and mercy despite their current situation. God was for them even in the midst of the unpredictability of their lives. But the people had to let go of their control and in the dark night of faith God led them to the Promised Land even if the route was not a straight path.

In that precarious place called the wilderness, God reveals himself to us with an intimacy that comes from trusting him in the midst of the uncertainties of life. The wilderness is never the end of the story because Scripture says that it becomes the place where salvation dawns and gives way to a land rich with water and abundant life. It ceases to be a place of exile and alienation. It turns us toward the Promised Land where we will arrive on God's time and on God's terms.

When in my own spiritual wilderness, God was present when he sent people to feed me words of his unconditional love. God was present when he sent people to sit with me as they patiently listened to my laments. Each ministered to me as if they were the hands and feet of Christ. And in time I gave up the illusion of a God that would spare me from pain and suffering. Instead I grew to embrace a God who lovingly sent his Son to stand by me in the wilderness and in the Promised Land. Eventually each unsettling situation turned into a life-altering experience and that is what I want us to remember today.

All of us will have wilderness experiences (that is a given) and some will have more than others. But the promise we hear in Scripture is that the place of testing (this place of scarcity) does not have to be a lonely and desolate place. It is the place where we encounter God. I promise God is there.

*From Hosea 2: I will bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her vineyards and make the valley a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. Amen*