

The Wild Places: Week 2

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2019

Monday, March 18

We continue in our second week of Lent reading passages from the wilderness narratives that sit between Israel's deliverance from slavery and their arrival in the Promised Land. The founding stories of this people of faith include rescue and promise, but also the chaos and confusion of wild places.

Exodus 19:1-9a (CEB)

19 On exactly the third-month anniversary of the Israelites' leaving the land of Egypt, they came into the Sinai desert. ²They traveled from Rephidim, came into the Sinai desert, and set up camp there. Israel camped there in front of the mountain ³while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him from the mountain, "This is what you should say to Jacob's household and declare to the Israelites: ⁴You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to me. ⁵So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. ⁶You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses came down, called together the people's elders, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸The people all responded with one voice: "Everything that the LORD has said we will do." Moses reported to the LORD what the people said.

⁹Then the LORD said to Moses, "I'm about to come to you in a thick cloud in order that the people will hear me talking with you so that they will always trust you."

Points of Interest

- It's striking how people so often encounter God away from busy economy and industry of human habitation. Certainly, the early Israelites' primary places of encountering God are not in any human-constructed building. Bible scholar Wes Howard-Brook: "Moses

encountered YHWH outside of Egypt, outside of empire, in the *wilderness* and at a *mountain*. These two sites are repeated places in which YHWH encounters Israel. It is where the authority of the state cannot reach.” (*Come Out, My People*, 143)

- The image of the eagles’ wings is a beautiful maternal image for the Divine. God scoops up her young to hold and to treasure, and in time to represent God to the whole earth as well. Many Jews have historically understood themselves as a chosen people, to be specially loved by God and especially equipped to represent the love and justice of God to the whole earth. The New Testament (in the letter Hebrews) also appropriates this responsibility to all followers of Jesus – to experience unique communion with God and to represent the love and justice of God to all the earth as well.
- Along with many other things, Moses passes on the eagles’ wings and holy priesthood news to the whole assembly, and the people shout out in unison: We’ll do everything that God says. I love that God’s response is to tell Moses: I think we should talk where they can overhear us, because I’m not so sure they understand. A funny moment in divine revelation.
- A small but interesting note. God wants people to hear God talking to Moses, not so that the people will trust God more (although that’s probably also true), but so that they will trust and listen to Moses. This is pretty sweet backing Moses gets from God, and also maybe a note of realism in how hard leadership and group learning really is. No matter how eager people may be, it takes a lot of trust and a lot of time for communities to learn new things and to change in any way. Change is hard.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your faith community’s calling to ride on eagle’s wings and be a holy priesthood. Pray that your faith community will experience God’s love and protection and represent the love and justice of God to your city.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Encounter and Discovery in Nature – This week, each day if you are able, spend a few minutes of quiet in a natural environment. This could be a patch of woods, a park, or even leaning against a single tree. Be creative with what’s available, or try a single, longer trip at one point during the week. (The ocean of Revere Beach, Boston Harbor, or the beaches of Dorchester Bay, and the woods of the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, and more are all available via public transportation.) Quiet your body and mind for a few minutes, and see what you notice or discover. Is there any way you differently encounter yourself, your life, your world, or God in this setting? Is there any perspective you take in?

Tuesday, March 19

Exodus 20:1-21 (CEB)

20 Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³You must have no other gods before me.

⁴Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. ⁶But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. ⁹Six days you may work and do all your tasks, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. ¹¹Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³Do not kill.

¹⁴Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵Do not steal.

¹⁶Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

¹⁷Do not desire your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the horn, and the mountain smoking, the people shook with fear and stood at a distance. ¹⁹They said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we'll listen. But don't let God speak to us, or we'll die."

²⁰Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid, because God has come only to test you and to make sure you are always in awe of God so that you don't sin." ²¹The people stood at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness in which God was present.

Points of Interest

- At Mount Sinai, out in the wilderness, God has some things to say to the people. The wild places, as it turns out, are a great time for re-centering, re-calibrating our life course. But first, a reminder of just who's talking to them – the god who brought them out of slavery. It would be easy to hear this as a guilt trip, but I think it's meant to clarify what's going on

here. God's reminding them that the purpose of this whole journey through the wild places, and whatever spiritual or ethical journey these commandments take them on, is liberation.

- There's been centuries of debate about what to do today with these ancient commandments. Some people want them on the walls of public buildings, while others think they're utterly irrelevant for modern life. I receive them as my own faith tradition's oldest, most central ethical teaching, guideposts for living that promise more liberation.
- The commandment against idol-making is tied to God's passion. Idols – physical representations of unseen gods, be they religious statues or any other objects of devotion and control – are nothing if not dispassionate. God is clear that God is more alive than that – passionate in consequence perhaps but far more passionate in loyalty and love. God wants to be related to as a Person, not an object or idea.
- The command to regular rest is liberating – there is more to life than work! It is also hospitable – it is for the immigrants, it's even for the animals. Worth keeping in mind when we consider that the lowest pay and lowest status jobs in our own economy tend don't have paid vacation times and often involve long or inconvenient hours and holding down two or more jobs to make ends meet!
- Honor of parents is for liberation too – it's for long, flourishing life in community.
- Letting your neighbor enjoy their own life feels particularly liberating as well. Our consumer economy is predicated on wanting stuff and experiences that we think other people have. That wears me out and troubles me, whereas wanting and consuming less (in those rare moments I take this to heart!) brings me freedom and peace.
- After all the words, the only thing the people pick up on is the fearsome smoke and noise. They witness an important moment in ethical and religious history while slowly backing away, telling Moses – catch us up later on whatever we missed.
- If these commands are meant to be helpful – guideposts toward the good life – than sin is the word in this text for the life that loses course. Moses doesn't want people running from God in fear, but in a relationship of awe that will keep them focused and inspired on the liberated way forward.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any of your friends or family who could use more rest or any other liberation these commands speak to, that they'll find guidance toward the most flourishing of lives.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Encounter and Discovery in Nature – This week, each day if you are able, spend a few minutes of quiet in a natural environment. This could be a patch of woods, a park, or even leaning against a single tree. Be creative with what’s available, or try a single, longer trip at one point during the week. (The ocean of Revere Beach, Boston Harbor, or the beaches of Dorchester Bay, and the woods of the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, and more are all available via public transportation.) Quiet your body and mind for a few minutes, and see what you notice or discover. Is there any way you differently encounter yourself, your life, your world, or God in this setting? Is there any perspective you take in?

Wednesday, March 20

Exodus 32:1-14

32 The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

²Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" ⁶They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

⁷The LORD spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything!⁸They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are.¹⁰Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

¹¹But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, "LORD, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" ¹⁴Then the LORD changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

Points of Interest

- Just after we read of the commandment to not trade in the living, passionate god for dead, controllable idols, people do just that.
- Why the move to idol making when Moses has been missing? We get hints of fear, abandonment, loneliness, stress, and boredom – the conditions both then and now in which individuals and communities easily lose our path.

- The people want “gods who can lead us” and Aaron, their priest, makes a golden bull calf. This might represent the Egyptian calf idol Apis, associated with royal divinity. It might also be a nod to the region’s fertility gods – the need for harvests and children and the fear of drought or infertility being the great anxiety of ancient agricultural societies in arid areas. Perhaps it’s good for humans to reach for the living God in these anxieties, rather than avoid our fears through idols.
- Lest we put too much of a distance between our own times and these ancient religious practices, remember that the United States has our own actual golden bull idol – the popular New York City tourist attraction whose virility now represents wealth and fortune – the longing for abundance and the fear of scarcity being one of the great anxieties of our age. Perhaps it’s good for humans to reach for the living God in these anxieties, rather than avoid our fears through busy industry.
- In last week’s passages, Moses was regularly stressed and fed up with people, while God was a calming and loving presence. Here Moses and God switch places – God is fed up and Moses calmly asks God to stay the course in steady, faithful love.
- This passage reminds me that the God of the Bible, and the God Jesus embodied is not the unmoved mover of Greek philosophy, but a personal and passionate God, one who can experience weariness and frustration, as we do.
- This passage also reminds me that humans can affect God. God has chosen to be connected to our story; prayer and love and human action move the heart of God.

A Direction for Prayer

If it feels authentic to you, confess to God our city or our country’s idolatry – the things we do to distract ourselves from our fears and try to assert control where we are vulnerable. Our obsession with wealth and consumption might be a place to start. Ask God to patiently lead us all to a path of healthier vulnerability and a trust in the Spirit of God to care for us.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Encounter and Discovery in Nature – This week, each day if you are able, spend a few minutes of quiet in a natural environment. This could be a patch of woods, a park, or even leaning against a single tree. Be creative with what’s available, or try a single, longer trip at one point during the week. (The ocean of Revere Beach, Boston Harbor, or the beaches of Dorchester Bay, and the woods of the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, and more are all available via public transportation.) Quiet your body and mind for a few minutes, and see what you notice or discover. Is there any way you differently encounter yourself, your life, your world, or God in this setting? Is there any perspective you take in?

Thursday, March 21

Exodus 33:12-34:9

¹²Moses said to the LORD, "Look, you've been telling me, 'Lead these people forward.' But you haven't told me whom you will send with me. Yet you've assured me, 'I know you by name and think highly of you.'¹³Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people."

¹⁴The LORD replied, "I'll go myself, and I'll help you."

¹⁵Moses replied, "If you won't go yourself, don't make us leave here.¹⁶Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth."

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, "I'll do exactly what you've asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name."

¹⁸Moses said, "Please show me your glorious presence."

¹⁹The LORD said, "I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD.' I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. ²⁰But," the LORD said, "you can't see my face because no one can see me and live." ²¹The LORD said, "Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. ²²As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. ²³Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible."

34 The LORD said to Moses, "Cut two stone tablets like the first ones. I'll write on these tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke into pieces. ²Get ready in the morning and come up to Mount Sinai. Stand there on top of the mountain in front of me. ³No one else can come up with you. Don't allow anyone even to be seen anywhere on the mountain. Don't even let sheep and cattle graze in front of the mountain." ⁴So Moses cut two stone tablets like the first ones. He got up early in the morning and climbed up Mount Sinai, just as the LORD had commanded him. He carried the two stone tablets in his hands. ⁵The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." ⁶The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed:

"The LORD! The LORD!

a God who is compassionate and merciful,
very patient,

full of great loyalty and faithfulness,

⁷ showing great loyalty to a thousand generations,
forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,

punishing for their parents' sins
their children and their grandchildren,
as well as the third and the fourth generation."

⁸At once Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. ⁹He said, "If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession."

Points of Interest

- I find these opening verses adorable. Moses expresses the fear and vulnerability that all leaders experience, and God offers presence and partnership. God knows and likes Moses and won't ever abandon him or his work. Jesus taught the radical idea that God feels this way about all of us, that we're all God's favorites.
- A moment when people in some way see or experience Divine presence is called – from God's perspective – theophany, appearance of God. From the human perspective, it's spiritual experience. Jesus and his first followers democratized these experiences, promising not constant but increasing felt, experienced sense of God with us.
- Moses' most intimate encounter with God occurs while he is alone, out on a mountainside in the wilderness. It also occurs while he is in the wild place of aging, fear, loneliness, and anxiety, just after a crisis in his community that tested his leadership. The wilderness – out in nature, apart from the busyness and idolatry of human civilization – has always been a rich place to encounter God. Our troubles and crises – unpleasant as they are – have also always been a rich crucible in which we can call out to God in our need and experience more personal, supernatural encounter than we are used to.
- Whatever Moses saw or experienced on the mountainside as God passed by, there's an attempt to put the personality and feel of God into words – compassionate, merciful, patient, loyal, and faithful. God is the personal source of all these characteristics, these qualities given pulse and personality.
- In our very individualistic culture, many of us are troubled by the generational comments – punishing children and grandchildren and even great grandchildren for their parents' sin. Is this fair? For one, there is counterpoint to this in the Bible, statements that God would *not* hold people accountable for others' actions. Secondly, I like to understand this in less mystical terms. If God is the creator of all, then God is also the god of culture and genetics. We know that through both nature and nurture, we all do carry some of the faults of our recent ancestors. This is life, and it perhaps does reflect something of God's sense of community and family and justice. Additionally, though, God is loyal enough to carry kindness and loyalty far longer – across a thousand generations. I think of one of the

great spiritual icons and leaders of our time in history, someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., who has one young grandchild. I wonder what it may mean that God will be faithful to the hope and legacy of this man – not just through his one living descendant of the third generation, but through all African-Americans, and through all who strive for healing and justice – for many hundreds of years into the future. That is a future I hope for, and that is the kind of love and loyalty I hope God carries.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for friends and family who struggle with difficult family legacies, that they will find the God of compassion and mercy patient with them, and kind and gentle with them in their struggles.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Encounter and Discovery in Nature – This week, each day if you are able, spend a few minutes of quiet in a natural environment. This could be a patch of woods, a park, or even leaning against a single tree. Be creative with what's available, or try a single, longer trip at one point during the week. (The ocean of Revere Beach, Boston Harbor, or the beaches of Dorchester Bay, and the woods of the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, and more are all available via public transportation.) Quiet your body and mind for a few minutes, and see what you notice or discover. Is there any way you differently encounter yourself, your life, your world, or God in this setting? Is there any perspective you take in?

Friday, March 22

Numbers 13:17-33

¹⁷When Moses sent them out to explore the land of Canaan, he said to them, "Go up there into the arid southern plain and into the mountains.¹⁸You must inspect the land. What is it like? Are the people who live in it strong or weak, few or many? ¹⁹Is the land in which they live good or bad? Are the towns in which they live camps or fortresses? ²⁰Is the land rich or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Be courageous and bring back the land's fruit." It was the season of the first ripe grapes.

²¹They went up and explored the land from the Zin desert to Rehob, near Lebohamath. ²²They went up into the arid southern plain and entered Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of the Anakites, lived. (Hebron was built seven years before Tanis in Egypt.) ²³Then they entered the Cluster ravine, cut down from there a branch with one cluster of grapes, and carried it on a pole between them. They also took pomegranates and figs. ²⁴That place was called the Cluster ravine because of the cluster of grapes that the Israelites cut down from there.

²⁵They returned from exploring the land after forty days. ²⁶They went directly to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Paran desert at Kadesh. They brought back a report to them and to the entire community and showed them the land's fruit. ²⁷Then they gave their report: "We entered the land to which you sent us. It's actually full of milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸There are, however, powerful people who live in the land. The cities have huge fortifications. And we even saw the descendants of the Anakites there. ²⁹The Amalekites live in the land of the arid southern plain; the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the mountains; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan."

³⁰Now Caleb calmed the people before Moses and said, "We must go up and take possession of it, because we are more than able to do it."

³¹But the men who went up with him said, "We can't go up against the people because they are stronger than we." ³²They started a rumor about the land that they had explored, telling the Israelites, "The land that we crossed over to explore is a land that devours its residents. All the people we saw in it are huge men. ³³We saw there the Nephilim (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We saw ourselves as grasshoppers, and that's how we appeared to them."

Points of Interest

- Wild places are often transitional places, and in between the known past and the unknown future. These times, what are called liminal spaces, are where most transformation and growth occurs, with that catch that they are also times of uncertainty

and risk. But seen this way, our wild places of uncertainty and confusion can be great gifts to us, if we are humble and curious and patient.

- Perhaps you're troubled by the hints of violence in this passage – the question at hand is how to “take possession” of someone else's land. Well, there are different opinions on this, but scholarly consensus is that the generation after Moses did *not* literally destroy the cities and residents of ancient Canaan. There are several theories regarding the ancient origins of the people of Israel, but they are all less violent and more complicated than that. Therefore, we'll read this passage as it was likely meant to be read – as a metaphor for many other situations in which the future is potentially bright but full of risk and uncertainty.
- I see three parts of our relationship to an unknown future. The first we'll call “*Investigate the Future.*” A team of spies walk through the land and inspect its fruit. This time is marked by curiosity and hope. Perhaps in all wild spaces, even the wilds of old age and approaching death, God calls us to curiosity and hope. We can never control the future, or the outcomes of our present moment, but we can examine our future possibilities with curiosity – why not? – and dare to have a posture of hope.
- The second part we'll call “*See the Promise and the Risk.*” The curious, hopeful team sees milk and honey – the land of their dreams – just as they see powerful people and huge walls that stand in the way of the dream. To note the promise and the risks of our hopes and dreams is good sense. To examine both the promise and risks of anything we think God might lead us toward is part of a response of faith.
- The third part is of our relationship to our unknown future is a binary choice: “*Take Possession, or Abandon the Dream.*” The advance team is divided, between the one who says they can do it and the many who say it is impossible. One says we are more than able, the rest see themselves as grasshoppers. This is the difference between a growth mindset (with effort and help, we can change and grow) and a fixed mindset (change and improvement is unlikely). It is the difference between hope and cynicism, between faith and despair.

A Direction for Prayer

For any in your faith community – yourself included – that see themselves as grasshoppers, pray that God births the hope that they are more than able. For any that lack vision of life beyond the wild places, pray that God grows curiosity, hope, and strength to imagine and take possession of a better future.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Encounter and Discovery in Nature – This week, each day if you are able, spend a few minutes of quiet in a natural environment. This could be a patch of woods, a park, or even leaning against a single tree. Be creative with what’s available, or try a single, longer trip at one point during the week. (The ocean of Revere Beach, Boston Harbor, or the beaches of Dorchester Bay, and the woods of the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, and more are all available via public transportation.) Quiet your body and mind for a few minutes, and see what you notice or discover. Is there any way you differently encounter yourself, your life, your world, or God in this setting? Is there any perspective you take in?