

The Rev. Anne Largent Smith  
Sermon for August 9, 2015 (Proper 14B)  
Preached at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Elk Grove / Sacramento, CA  
Texts: 1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35,41-51

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Sometimes my husband and my daughters and I pack our suitcases and wedge them into the car, and pack everybody in with some snacks and some pillows and our electronic devices, and we drive. We used to favor I-5; these days it's highway 99. We drive south. For hours. And there are long stretches of this drive that are, to me, boring, and more and more these days there are stretches that are just nothing, not even farmland anymore. We drive to see my dad or my brother and his family or my in-laws, and after 7 or 8 or 9 hours of driving it's good, very good, to arrive at the end of our journey. But to get there, we have to head out into a kind of wilderness.

Wildernesses are pretty important to our walk with God—I suppose that could include the wildernesses of Central California, physical places we find ourselves. But more often it's two other wildernesses that matter.

The first wilderness at the heart of our faith story is the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula and Palestine, lands on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea that we now call Egypt and Israel and Syria.

It's the wilderness that the Hebrew people crossed in their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. It's the wilderness that Elijah flees to when Queen Jezebel wants him dead. It's the wilderness that John the Baptist hung out in and that Jesus was tempted in. This first wilderness matters as a part of the story and the fabric of our faith. The things that happened there, the ways the people of God encounter God, teach us who God is and what life with God is for.

In our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings today, we are in the midst of a battle royal going on in Israel. There are prophets who are true to God, and prophets who follow the Canaanite Baals, and the King, Ahab, and Queen, Jezebel, are on the side of Baal. They've killed many of the prophets of God, but there's one who just will not let them rest, and that is Elijah. Because of the sin of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, Elijah has asked God to keep the rain from falling in Israel for three and a half years. And now Elijah has invited the prophets of Baal to prove the worth of their god by praying that he would send fire down to burn a sacrifice prepared for him. The prophets of Baal have begged for this fire, but none came. And then Elijah does the same, and God sends fire that consumes his sacrifice completely, and the prophets of Baal flee for their lives—but they are cut down. Elijah kills them all.

When Jezebel hears from Ahab what Elijah has done, having proved himself and killed her beloved prophets, she swears she will have his life. And so Elijah flees alone into the wilderness. And here he is, beneath a broom tree, the only shade in this hot and barren landscape, with

nowhere to go, and no hope that he can return and remain alive. There in the wilderness, Elijah asks God to let him die.

But that's not what happens. Elijah discovers himself in the company of an angel who offers him water and bread, and tells him to eat, for he must go on a long journey. He rests awhile, and the angel returns, and again Elijah eats the bread of the angels. Thus fortified, Elijah makes the long journey across the desert and finds refuge at Mount Horeb—the Mountain of God. Elijah's life is returned to him.

In today's gospel passage, we find Jesus in the wilderness, too, but he's not alone. In fact he's drawn a remarkable crowd. Thousands have gathered to hear his teaching, and when the time comes for dinner, they may not be as bad off as Elijah was, but also there certainly aren't any restaurants handy to grab a bite from. So Jesus provides a miraculous meal, beginning with two small fish and five barley loaves and ending up with twelve basketfuls left over. Now this crowd isn't one that is hungry just this day; many of them live precariously close to hunger every day. That's one reason they don't cherish being occupied and governed by the Roman Empire, which has no interest in improving their lot. But an ear full of what Jesus has to say and a belly full of the bread Jesus has fed them give this crowd ideas, ideas about a possible insurrection—they figure this guy who cares so much about them and offers free meals to boot is a good candidate to be king in place of their Roman overlords.

Jesus is wise to this plan, though, and slips out of the crowd—to a deserted place, alone. So night falls, we have Jesus alone on the side of a mountain, and crowds of people down by the lakeshore camping out, and the disciples deciding they'll sail across Lake Galilee to the opposite shore. Sometime in the night, two things happen. One—a storm comes up on the lake, a storm that makes the disciples fear for their lives. And two—Jesus walks out to their boat on the water, calms the storm, and brings their boat to land.

Now the crowd, which has stayed put, wakes up the next morning and does a brief count of the boats that remain on the shore. There had been one last night; this morning they are down to zero. So they make up their minds to follow the disciples around to the other side of the lake, and when they get to where they are, lo and behold, there's Jesus, who had evaded them the day before. *When did you get over here?* they ask. But it's a new day, and Jesus has some more teaching to do. He calls them out on their thinking.

*You are pursuing me because you ate your fill of my miracle dinner last night, Jesus says, but there's much more to what I'm offering you than just a loaf of bread. You need to work for the bread that endures for eternal life.*

*Ah, says the crowd. We know this system—we know this religion. We're really good at it. We know how to do the works that please God. But apparently you've got some new rules, Jesus. So what are they? What are the new rules we're supposed to follow, and how can we know for sure that you're actually giving us God's word on this? What sign will you give to prove yourself?*

Because here's what the crowd is thinking about: they're thinking about their ancestors who followed Moses. They're remembering Moses giving them the law, which laid out for them what God wanted them to do so they could please God. And they're thinking about the sign that Moses gave the people to show that this really was God's plan, that they hadn't left their homes and their three meals a day in Egypt to die of starvation in the wilderness: He gave them bread. He gave them manna. Manna, the bread that came down from heaven.

This is the story that tells them who they are, who God is, and how things work between them. Step one: God sends a prophet to tell them how to be religious. Step two: the prophet gives a sign to prove he's a messenger of God and not someone else. Step three: they get to work doing whatever it is. That's the program, that's the system. It's only natural for them to understand what Jesus is doing the same way.

Jesus is telling them how to be religious, how to know and please God, how to gain life with God. Since that's step one, they move to step two: *What sign will you give us, Jesus, to prove you're from God? Moses gave our ancestors manna; what are you going to do to convince us?*

And Jesus corrects the crowd's misperception—it was not Moses who gave the people manna. It was God who sent the manna from heaven. It was God then, and it is God now. Now as then, God offers the people bread from heaven, the true bread that gives life to the world.

*Yes, Jesus! says the crowd. Life-giving bread. That's what we want. We're hungry, we're always so hungry... give us this bread so we don't have to be so hungry anymore.*

And this is where Jesus blows their minds: the bread from heaven isn't barley loaves on a lakeshore or manna flakes spread out like dew across the desert landscape. The bread from heaven is Jesus himself, sent to give life, abundant and unending. *I am the bread of life, Jesus says, come down from heaven.*

I imagine a stunned silence. After a minute, murmuring from the crowd. *Who does Jesus think he is? Does he think we're idiots? We know where he comes from. He's from Nazareth, not heaven. We know his mom and dad. His father is Joseph, not God.*

And the crowd can't understand it. They can't understand that they you don't work your way to God. Rather, God draws us to Godself. In drawing us to God, God draws us to Jesus. And if you find yourself drawn to Jesus, you are being drawn to God. If any action is required, is isn't works, like showing up for religious festivals and offering requisite sacrifices. The only action is to believe it. Believe in Jesus, believe that through Jesus you are being drawn into God and given life abundant.

This believing—it's more than intellectual assent. It's believing with your whole self. It's agreeing with all that you are that what God says is true. It is surrendering your will and your fear and your need for control. It is trusting, relying upon God. It is learning to know yourself as God's beloved child.

And here's where that second kind of wilderness comes in, the metaphorical wilderness. Because this journey to knowing ourselves as beloved children of God involves leaving behind our fears, our security nets, the comfortable corners we have carved out in the world so that everything makes sense and nothing is out of our control. You surely recognize that in truth there is no such place—and in such a place there is no truth. There's no place where we can ensure nothing we fear will come to pass. There's no place where we have complete control of everything in our lives, ourselves or our environment. There's no place where we can secure our lives and our fortunes against every threat, every mishap. No, there is no such place, and when we try to live there, our lives become very small indeed. In fact, that place is a place of death. The more we try to save ourselves, the more we cut ourselves off from truly living.

But God invites us out. God draws us out of that small, fearful place, toward a life that is abundant and everlasting. God invites us to journey with Jesus, and stepping out on that journey—it's like entering a wilderness.

In the wilderness the Hebrews and Elijah and John the Baptist and Jesus all became extraordinarily vulnerable. All had to rely completely on God, and go into places that were uncomfortable, places that felt barren and desolate at times; places that were wild and threatening at other times. As we journey with Jesus, we may feel any and all of these things too. Journeying with Jesus means entering places we wouldn't otherwise choose to go, in circumstances that we have no control over. It means encountering uncivilized, disordered people. It means we can't plan our meals or our housing or our finances with certainty, but God will certainly give us what we need.

Sometimes we're in a wilderness alone like Elijah under the broom tree, wishing it would all end, alone and feeling hopeless. Sometimes we're in a wilderness with others like the crowds that followed Jesus, looking for answers, hoping for salvation. We are hungry, hungry for abundant life.

And we will be fed. Like the Hebrews with manna in the desert, like Elijah with the bread of angels, like the crowds with the barley loaves. Except that our food is the bread that is Jesus—the very life of our Savior entering us, filling and feeding us, becoming alive in us. Whatever wilderness we're in, there is always this table, this sacred meal by which we are united with God's Son in his resurrection life.

Are you in a wilderness? Do you know when you've come out of one? Is God inviting you to walk there? Maybe you need to create a little wilderness of your own so that you can hear God's invitation to you. Some people retreat to the desert for this purpose, or the mountains, or the beach. Wild places have a special way of helping us connect with God.

Or your heart may be drawn to some daring venture—sometimes it is God's Spirit inspiring us into such uncharted territory, calling us to give more of our money away, to spend our time building relationships or helping others—sometimes that's the kind of wilderness we are led to

walk. Or maybe your heart is troubled, and you don't know how to hope, and you feel alone—may God grant you the food of angels so that you can come to a place of refuge and return to fullness of life. Or perhaps you've been thrust into the wilderness by illness or loss—Jesus will walk with you there, too. And we can do our best to walk with each other.

We all have our wildernesses. We step into them because of the hope of what awaits us on the other side. We may do our best to arm ourselves for what we'll experience there, the way Keith and I put gas in the car and get the oil changed and do so many things to make our drives through Central California a success—but you never know what snags you'll hit, or where you'll end up eating, or how long the journey will take. Your wilderness may take surprising, amazing, or distressing shapes. But it will be good—very good—to have walked this way, and to arrive at the end of this journey God has invited you on.

Amen.