Lessons from the Wilderness

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For those of you following the daily devotions and reading Eugene Peterson’s *Leap Over a Wall*, you know that David is driven into the wilderness to save his own life because Saul wants to kill him. David has left the orientation of the beauty of green pastures, where he was a shepherd, and the splendor of the king’s palace, where he was a music therapist. He has been thrust into a season of disorientation of wilderness living. But, in the passage we just read, we see that David could have taken revenge, he could have eliminated his enemy, and he could have grabbed hold of the throne and, in doing so, changed his difficult life. But he didn’t. Why? Why didn’t he? David is “a man after God’s own heart,” and he experiences God’s presence and power working in and through and for him, laying the ground work for a reorientation that will help him in leading the nation as king. David’s wilderness experience teaches us lessons that can help us in the messiness of our lives.

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equipped to continue the life of vocational ministry that I had already been engaged in for ten years. I had a sense of direction for my life journey—where I was going and how I was going to get there. My life had been like a freeway as I traveled as fast and as far as I could, loaded down with many responsibilities.

But then life took some expected turns. I didn’t go into ministry right after graduation; I waited a year-and-a-half for a call to ministry. During that same time, my husband was laid off from his job, which put us under financial stress, and we began to grapple with the reality of infertility issues. Though there was no exit sign, one day I woke up to the reality that I was in a wilderness that was impacting me emotionally, physically, relationally and spiritually. I came to realize that my circumstances required a change of mind and change of perspective for my own well-being and the well-being of others. I couldn’t do as much as I used to do, so I had to ask myself, “What do I need in the wilderness?” I realized that what I needed was to travel differently—with different expectations of God, myself, others and life itself.

Twenty years ago, I was living in Chicago. I was newly married, and was studying at seminary to become better
This morning, I want to walk through the beginning of David’s wilderness experience to glean lessons we can learn that will help us to navigate this unfamiliar landscape of the soul. What do we need in the wilderness?

First, we need to recognize our place in the journey of faith. For David, the place of the wilderness was a geographical location in the desert of Israel—a place that was dry, barren and parched, filled with real-life enemies. But the wilderness is also a place in the journey of faith that has been traveled by the saints of God many times before—not only David but Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, the disciples and our Lord Jesus.

Though our circumstances are very different from theirs, we too live in a fallen world where bad things happen and life is messy. Circumstances sometimes come upon us that we do not choose or desire—changes that rock our world in one way or another—grief, illness, unemployment, broken relationships, or any number of other transitions or losses. It is always helpful to name our place in the journey of faith. But when we find ourselves in the dry, barren and parched landscape of the soul, it is absolutely necessary to do so.

First Samuel 21:1-9: In the wilderness, we need to recognize that basic provisions are essential. David knows what he needs and he knows where to go to get it. So he runs to the priest at Nob, the holy sanctuary, the place of God to find basic provisions—bread for himself and his men and a sword for the fight. Eugene Peterson makes the wonderful connection that the Word of God is often referred to as bread or as a sword. In the messiness of life, we need nourishment, real fuel to stay alive, and a real instrument to battle the enemies of heart, mind, body and soul.

In the midst of my wilderness experience, I worked as a temp for over a year after seminary while waiting for a call to a ministry position. I did data entry day after day after day. The job was tedious and draining for me. But while I typed away, I had the opportunity to listen to recorded sermons and Christian radio. I still thank God for His goodness and provision and the way He spoke to me directly through many messages and particularly through Charles Stanley’s three-week series on Advancing Through Adversity. It was bread and water for my dry and parched soul.

God’s word was also like a sword protecting me in an ongoing battle with confusion, bitterness, resentment, anger and depression that threatened to overcome me in that time. The practices of weekly
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Sabbath and worship were times I experienced the presence and nearness of God through the word preached and in receiving Holy Communion. These are God’s basic provision for our journey of faith, but they were especially precious and essential in the midst of our wilderness experiences.

First Samuel 21:10-22:5: Along with recognizing our place and the provisions that are essential, we also need to recognize the people who are helpful and not helpful. Last week, we learned about the significance of David and Jonathan’s relationship. You will notice Jonathan’s name on both the helpful and unhelpful lists. Jonathan loved David, but the truth is that because of his position as Saul’s son, he could not go into the wilderness; he could not walk that journey with David.

Some of our friends cannot go into the wilderness with us either, for a variety of reasons. This can put a strain on relationships. When I was going through my struggle with infertility, most of my best friends were unable to support me because they were having babies and starting families. At first I felt hurt and disappointed. But I came to realize their journey was taking another turn, and they needed to find the support for their journey and I needed to find support for mine.

Now I do want to point out that Jonathan does show up in the wilderness and we read this very precious line: “There he strengthened his hand through the Lord and encouraged him not to be afraid” (1 Samuel 23:16-17). While we may not be able to enter the wilderness with people, we can find ways to love, encourage and strengthen those we know who are in that very difficult place. One day, in the midst of our wilderness, a beautiful bouquet of flowers was delivered to us anonymously. We have no idea to this day who it was, but it meant the world to us then and even now.

As David flees into the wilderness, he goes to King Achish of Gath, probably seeking to make some sort of alliance or perhaps to find protection. But when David realizes that he has been recognized, he is afraid and knows this relationship will not be safe or helpful but probably dangerous. Perhaps David fears being taken hostage and used as a bargaining chip. Whatever the reason, he feigns madness, is released and escapes.

It’s interesting to note the people who come to David—people who are helpful to him and he is helpful to them. His family seeks him—perhaps out of loyalty but probably because they’re in danger and realize that being with David is probably the safest place to be.

Other people you wouldn’t expect show up: “Everyone who was in distress, and every-one who was in debt, and
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everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he [David] became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred” (1 Samuel 22:2).

David’s wilderness experience gives him the capacity to identify with outcast and marginalized people. He actually serves as a magnet to attract them because he, too, is rejected, cast out and on the run.

In my pastoral ministry, I often hear how cancer patients are most helped by cancer survivors, and those who are grieving are most helped by those who have grieved a similar loss. Shared experience is a powerful bonding agent. And those who have been through hard times are often the very ones who are willing to come alongside to love and support wilderness wanderers.

This is one of the lessons from the wilderness. We may need a different kind of relationship than we have ever had before. And for those of us who find ourselves in the wilderness, we need to be proactive in finding the people who will be helpful and safe and able to give us the support we need. And, as friends, we can help point our loved ones to helpful resources and relationships.

Counseling and spiritual direction were helpful resources for me in the wilderness. We, as a church, have a variety of helpful ministries and support groups such as Renewing Prayer, GriefShare, Passages, Cancer Companions, Widows and Widowers, Stephen Ministry and NewSpring. We list them every week in our bulletin to remind you that when you land in the wilderness you don’t have to journey alone.

Perhaps the most important thing in the wilderness is our need to recognize our posture before God. Both David and Saul are in the wilderness, but their postures are quite different. Saul exemplifies a willful posture, while David exemplifies a willing posture. In his book, Desiring God’s Will, David Benner writes that there are really only two prayers in life: my will be done, or thy will be done. He goes on to say: “Willfulness is living a stubborn no. Willingness is living a loving yes. Willfulness is always a stand against something. But being against things has an impact on our soul that is quite different from the soul-nourishing effect of being for things.

First Samuel 22:6-23: Saul illustrates a person who is against not only David but, more important, against God and His will for a leadership transition. Saul has already tried to kill David multiple times and, in chapter 22, we see what lengths he will go to in exercising power to maintain control of the kingdom. When Saul learns that David has been at Nob, he goes into a crazed frenzy ordering his soldiers to
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kill all the priests whom he perceives have aided David. When they refuse, Saul’s right-hand man Doeg complies, killing not only the 85 priests but their families and livestock, as well. We learned earlier, in chapter 16:14, that “the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.” Now we see what results.

Many have asked me what that means. What is going on? Is God in control? Is God responsible for what Saul is doing? I’m grateful to Bruce Birch, who is going to be with us later today for our Center-Point forum. I’m eager to hear him speak, as his commentary has been so helpful to me in writing the daily devotions and preparing for teaching and preaching on David. Dr. Birch writes: “God is at work largely through and in spite of human agency. God does not remove either David or Saul from responsibility for his own actions. Even the evil spirit that plagues Saul is an indication of his alienation from divine power and the guidance of God’s Spirit, but it is not in evidence as a coercive power making Saul’s decisions for him.

“The hard truth of this terrible story is that Saul has become an evil man. He was not inherently so. He is not devoid of qualities even now that arouse our sympathy. But he has become evil in the obsessive desire to maintain his hold on power….The outcome is terrible to behold.

“The hard truth of human freedom is that God does not stay the hand of one bent on evil…. In our time, as in Saul’s, human freedom may be used for evil. The desire to gain or maintain power over others still leads to acts of mindless violence” (Bruce Birch, The New Interpreters Bible Commentary Volume II, page 1149).

We only have to read history or our daily newspaper to recognize the truth of these words and witness to the many Sauls who have and continue to hurt others. Not all willful postures end in such evil and violence, but our desire to hold on to power and control can lead to other kinds of devastation—toxic bitterness, resentment, jealousy, depression and anger that can lead to words and actions that cannot be taken back, leaving wounds and scars on broken relationships. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

First Samuel 22:20-24:20: David shows us another way—a willing posture. He is not so much against Saul as for God. How did David maintain a willing posture? How do we maintain a willing posture? David’s experience gives us direction. When he hears of the death and destruction that happened at Nob, David does what is necessary in facing sin and evil by taking responsibility (1 Samuel 22:22-23). The violence was Saul’s, and David
David understands that his posture before God is one of need, and so he surrenders to God over and over through prayer and obedience. He could have blamed and moaned about Saul, but instead he says, “I am responsible.” He saw Doeg at Nob but did not say or do anything. Now he takes responsibility by inviting the sole survivor of that terrorist attack to join his company. It’s ours to enter into the fray of God’s love and redemption to take responsibility for what we can in order to willingly participate with God in bringing about His good and hopeful future to all.

David also exemplifies a willing posture in his praying (1 Samuel 23:1-29). We won’t take time to read it, but I encourage you to go back and look at chapter 23 carefully because over and over again, David goes to God in prayer asking for direction, listening for guidance and then responding accordingly. David understands that his posture before God is one of need, and so he surrenders to God over and over through prayer and obedience. His numerous escapes from Saul don’t happen by mere coincidence or because David is faster or more clever than Saul. The escape is possible because God has intervened on his behalf and David knows that and recognizes that.

In 1 Samuel 23, we read of the many wilderness places where David escaped. The slide before you is a picture from the wilderness of En Gedi. In this terrain, this rock, this stronghold, David found a hiding place—a refuge from his enemies. But when you read the psalm, it is clear that David knows it is not the landscape or circumstances that protected and provided for him. The imagery used reveals that David didn’t just know about God—David knew God experientially. He understood that God is his real source of life and hope. Look at Psalm 62: 5-8:

My soul, wait in silence for God only,
For my hope is from Him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.
On God my salvation and my glory rest;
The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.
Trust in Him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.

David’s willing posture is exemplified in his taking responsibility, praying, and finally in letting go and letting God. This is best seen in the passage we read at the beginning of the sermon from chapter 24. In the cave of En Gedi, Saul was vulnerable and completely at David’s mercy. David seems to begin playing a game by cutting off a piece of Saul’s robe, but let’s be clear, he could have cut off more than that—even Saul’s life. So, now we can answer the question I began with: “Why didn’t David
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The passage tells us: “The Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not raise my hand against my Lord; for he is the Lord’s anointed.’….May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you” (1 Samuel 24:10, 12).

David refuses the willful posture of being against God or God’s anointed. David maintains a willing posture, letting go of control and the temptation to take things into his own hands and letting God do what only God can do—or should do.

What we see through David’s wilderness experience is that David is continuing to become the kind of person who is able to trust God and do what needs to be done. In the end, Saul recognized this too—that David is the righteous one. Who sends an enemy away unharmed? Only one who dares to trust God to do what only God can do. Saul did not have the experiential knowledge of God to be able to do that, but David did. Saul knows his days are numbered and David will be king.

The wilderness experience is often one in which we feel God is absent, but all the waiting and wondering and wrestling is a witness to the truth that God is with us shaping, forming, teaching and helping us. In the wilderness, we learn to trust God and His abiding love, amazing grace, and awesome power to do in and through and for us what only He can do. The wilderness is not typically a place we choose to go. But God is there in the messiness of life, and He is so much greater than our circumstances that He is able to make all things work for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

We, as a church, recognize that people go through wilderness experiences, so we provide support through relationships and the support groups I’ve already mentioned. But we also quarterly hold a service for healing and wholeness to provide a worship experience where people can name their place in the journey, receive basic provisions, and pray with people in ways that are helpful.

Next week, Sunday, October 6 at 7:00 p.m., we will have our fall service of healing and wholeness. We want to help individuals in whatever wilderness experience you may find yourself. But we also want to acknowledge that we, as a community, have been through a kind of wilderness. As some of you know, eight years ago VPC learned that the youth director was abusing young women in our Student Ministries program. Many have and are still experiencing ongoing pain caused by this abuse—survivors, families, current and former leaders in the church. In
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In this service, we will name our place in the journey as we continue to seek God together in a willing posture of taking responsibility, praying and continuing to let go and let God do what only He can do in forgiving, healing, transforming and restoring us—individually and as a body. We hope many of you will join us whether you are struggling with your own wilderness experience or whether you have been impacted by this corporate experience.

The great surprise of the David story, in our VPC story, in Janet’s story, and in our own personal stories is that even in the messiness of life and human brokenness and sin, God prevails. His redemptive will is moving forward as his grace and power continue to do in and through and for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” In his life, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Christ our Lord. AMEN.