In the Wilderness

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 32:1-9

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Wilderness can be geographical. It can also be emotional and psychological. Wilderness can be a state of mind or a disposition in the heart.

This sermon will have particular relevance to any right now who are going through a hard time. You may be confused or bewildered. You may be feeling disoriented and out of sorts. You may be living in something called wilderness.

Initially, I had planned on preaching on the subject of idolatry. I submitted my sermon title and text on Wednesday for inclusion in our bulletin and began preparing to have something meaningful to say. Early Friday morning, at 4 a.m. to be exact, I woke up with a start, thinking about this sermon. I couldn’t shake the thought—don’t preach about idolatry; preach about wilderness.

Last week in *The Story*, we read about Moses’ dramatic parting of the Red Sea. God miraculously delivered His people from the advancing Egyptian army and deposited them into the desert. They spend the next 40 years wandering in this wilderness.

As a crow flies, it’s only 240 miles from Egypt to the Promised Land. It should have taken them only 11-12 days to complete the journey. Instead, it took them 40 years. You could say that God took them on the scenic tour. You see, there are valuable lessons to be learned in the wilderness.

If you find yourself in the wilderness right now, you’re in good company. Moses is in the wilderness when he encounters God in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1ff). Elijah is in the wilderness when he hears God speaking to him in a still small voice (1 Kings 19:12). John the Baptist spent time in the wilderness training for his ministry as a forerunner to Jesus (Mark 1). After Paul was converted, he prepared for this missionary work by spending three years in the Arabian Desert (Galatians 1:17-18). After Jesus is baptized by John, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to prepare for his mission (Matthew 4:1).

Our biblical heroes all spend time in the wilderness. Sooner or later, you’re likely to take a trip to the desert. There are dangers and perils associated with this wilderness. There’s also a valuable lesson to be learned in the desert.
First, the perils. In our story, Moses is summoned to the mountain to receive the stone tablets on which are engraved the ten words or Ten Commandments. Moses’ brother Aaron, who is second in command, is expressly told to wait with the people at the base of the mountain until Moses has returned (Exodus 24).

Notice how our story opens, “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain…” (Exodus 32:1). Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain. When all that you’re doing is waiting, 40 days seems like an eternity. What is it about the number 40 that is so central to our story? Forty days on the mountain. Forty years in the wilderness. Forty is the same number of days Jesus will spend in the desert preparing for his mission.

The people have grown tired of waiting. They’re ready for action. The narrator tells us they gather around Aaron. This is not a love fest; it’s a mob rule. They deliver the ultimatum, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.”

Notice in our story when the train first goes off the track. It starts with impatience. Impatience is what fuels their anxiety. Are you listening, Northern Virginians? Impatience is what triggers their downward slide.

The next verse is telling: “As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” “This fellow Moses” is a rather curious way of referring to their esteemed leader. It’s not as though they are ready to break out in a rousing chorus of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.” They are already distancing themselves from Moses’ leadership.

Aaron immediately caves into their request. I don’t want to be too hard on Aaron, but he strikes me as something of a people-pleaser. He doesn’t challenge their request for a god-substitute. Instead, he directs them to bring all their gold to him. The gold is melted down and cast into a golden calf. Aaron declares the next day to be a festival to the Lord. Note, he doesn’t dismiss God; rather he attempts to syncretize Egyptian gods with the biblical God.
The church today, particularly in the segment of the church we call the mainline church, is afflicted with a similar temptation to want to syncretize the values of our common culture with the gospel. The two don’t always mix!

So, what’s the big attraction to a golden calf? A calf or young bull was the most powerful deity in the pantheon of Egyptian deities. Apis, who was revered as the sacred bull of Egypt, served as a symbol of fertility and strength.

Even though they have fled slavery in Egypt, Israel wants to go back to what is familiar and comfortable. God will use these wilderness years to good advantage. God has successfully led Israel out of Egypt. Now comes the more difficult assignment; that of getting Egypt out of Israel.

With Moses out of the picture, the people want something more tangible. They want God to be more accessible. They want a deity they can see and touch. They want a mascot god to carry around with them.

Meanwhile, back on the mountain, God and Moses are locking down on the Ten Commandments. God is annoyed with His people; really annoyed. God calls them “stiff-necked.” It’s an agricultural term meaning stubborn and obstinate. On my grandfather’s farm, when cows didn’t comply with your request, they would stiffen their necks. It was nearly impossible to move cows when they resisted this way.

God is angry enough with Israel’s stubbornness to destroy Israel. But Moses proves to be a daring intercessor. He reminds Almighty God of what the pagan neighbors will think if God incinerates His people. Moses pleads with God to remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And you know something? It works! God repents! Normally repentance is something we do. But here God is willing to be persuaded by Moses. You can say goodbye to God as Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover. This biblical God is willing to assume all the risks associated with mixing it up with people. It’s messy to become personally involved with redemption as we see prominently on display in the story of Jesus.

The wilderness is a place of danger and peril—there are dangers associated with impatience and the desire to syncretize competing values.
Yet, the wilderness is also a place where valuable lessons can be learned. It’s a place where God speaks to Moses and delivers His commandments. I have four suggestions as we explore the so-what application of this story to our own lives.

First, be open to grow in the wilderness. If you are in the middle of wilderness right now, don’t fight it. Be open to what you can learn in the wilderness.

The writer of Deuteronomy looks back on Israel’s wilderness wanderings this way, “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years to humble and test you” (8:2-3). Let the wilderness be our teacher. Wilderness can be a time of learning, even if it’s learning lessons the hard way.

Second, be sustained by Jesus in the wilderness. The Psalmist asks a provocative, rhetorical question: “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” (78:19). The answer is provided in the following verse. This God who supplies water from a rock and manna from heaven will provide for your needs also (78:20).

Jesus is the living water and the bread of life which comes down from heaven. He refreshes our weary souls in our wanderings through the wilderness. When Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness to turn stones into bread, Jesus counters, “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Find your daily source of life in him. Seek Jesus in prayer. Encounter him in worship. Meet Jesus in his Word, the Bible. That’s why we lift up practices like prayer, worship and Scripture meditation.

Third, don’t go it alone in the desert. We need spiritual companions in the desert. Never mind all the attention given to Facebook Friends. We need spiritual friends to help us in the journey. We need Christian companions to draw us close to Christ. The Quakers call their community a society of friends. Would that we would become a society of spiritual friends! Consider the Proverb, “A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity” (17:17).
Fourth, God provides a way through the wilderness. God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, “I will provide a way in the wilderness” (43:19). Sometimes we are so busy praying for a way out of the wilderness that we don’t recognize God’s way through it. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:5). Robert Frost includes this line in his 1914 poem, Servant of Servants: “The best way out is always through.” God is particularly adept at making a way where there is no way. God makes a way through the Red Sea (Isaiah 43:16). God makes a way through the wilderness. Sometimes the best way out is the way through.