

Looking Toward the Wilderness

I'm grateful, that, of the many things that I **do** struggle with, claustrophobia **isn't** one of them. I may not be keen on crawling through a tight space, or being in a small room with a big crowd of people, but it's tolerable. I don't mind the elevator doors shutting behind me and I never find myself wondering if they'll open again. However, the thought of being physically "hemmed in" is much different for me than the feelings evoked when I consider being psychologically, spiritually and emotionally "boxed in!" That's a different story!

I invite us this evening – individually and collectively – to bring to awareness the places, experiences, understandings/lack of understanding, answers and questions...that *seemingly* bring us to the brink of extinguished options, of uncertainty about way forward, to times of impasse, dead end or even to what seems as the brink of abyss. What to do when "next steps" don't seem probable, feasible or even possible? What to do when it *appears* that **the** script of our lives has already been written? What to do when a very real *sense* of imprisoning hopelessness turns into painful and paralyzing anxiety?

The Old Testament reading for tonight offers us a wonderful image for these very real human *and Christian* experiences. Our reading from Exodus brings us alongside of the people through which God is intending to bring blessing to all peoples. Yet, this promised-filled people find themselves on the edge of the wilderness...(with more wilderness as far as the human eye can see.) It seems that their future is imperiled – a desert lies before them. (within them) Survival is in question... The wilderness is real, Egypt also,, how does **this** fit into God's plan...now what?

This evening, we'll use this wilderness imagery as we seek to open ourselves to an encounter with reality and possibility. Not any old encounter of reality and possibility, but our very own, at this very time. ("At the crosshairs of time and place, history and geography is the incarnation." John Dominic Crossan) I may say in addition, that at the intersection of reality and possibility, God waits with us. At the intersection of reality and possibility, we may fear "reality." At the intersection of reality and possibility, we may fear "possibility." At this poignant intersection, we have a choice to make...can we participate in the **possibility** of God's redemptive work within the **reality** of life? Can we "flesh out" the **reality** of God's presence among us alongside the truly frightful **possibilities** of life in global 2008?

In order to awaken our imaginations, let's revisit the story.

The people of Israel have just come through some especially harrowing days. They have made some tough choices. First of all, this guy Moses had shown up again. He had been away from the community for along time. He had disappeared into the desert after killing

one of the Egyptians – even though it had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Moses had gone on with life, taking a wife and tending to the things that the nomadic shepherd’s life demanded.

One day, however, while at the “back of the wilderness” (sounds remote enough) he comes across a strange thing...a burning bush. Exodus 3 records a bit of Moses’ conversation with himself (seems to be important that we would know what he was thinking!) “Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight...’
When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.”
When Moses turned aside to look...God called to him out of the bush.

Moses returned to his people in Egypt – with fear and trembling – at the thought of his reception. And it wasn’t easy for the people to be convinced to venture forth from reality even though it was sucking the life force out of them. The possibility of a new reality seemed beyond comprehension. Yet, in tonight’s text, we find them – on the eastern side of the Red Sea...Egypt behind them. They’ve just come out of a time of rest in the oasis of Elim...they had collected themselves in a wonderful place with 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees, where they camped by the water. Ah, what a great place to be, what a great place to stay! But God drew them forward, forward into the wilderness. They were lured into the wilderness by the possibility of God’s promise of a life where they would find “milk and honey,” the richness of existence, the fullness of life. But, as we well know, risks await in the wilderness:

The wilderness – a place of loneliness and lament.

The wilderness – a place of temptation, hunger and thirst

The wilderness – a place of real danger, where it is possible that all could end.

Yet also remember the blessings:

The wilderness – also a place of solitude and soul-searching.

The wilderness - also a place of restoration, manna & quail – or the “daily bread” for which we pray.

The wilderness – also a place of the certain realities and possibilities of God for new beginnings.

The wilderness - a *real place* in the story of the people of Israel, a *real experience* for us.

Tonight’s account isn’t the only one about folks being drawn into the wilderness. Remember the sustenance given to Hagar as she fled into the wilderness with Ishmael – the wilderness exile - a seeming death sentence. Remember Elijah, who facing certain extermination at the hand of Ahab sought refuge in the wild places. In the barrenness of this place, he was ministered to by the still, small voice of God, tended to him by unlikely scavengers, ones who more than likely would have been waiting to pick his bones! And of course, Jesus, immediately following his public anointing by the Spirit of God faced

some of his most difficult days of discernment – nowhere else but in the wilderness. The wilderness – for these people and the people of Israel -yes, a place of risk and a place of blessing. The wilderness- for us – yes, our experience of the Kingdom of God – already (reality), and not yet (possibility).

The image of the wilderness – from the Hebrew could also be translated as “that which is beyond.” The wilderness experience invites us to take note of where we are right now. The account of Exodus 16 is a gift to us as we reflect on our own lives and our own behavior. Even though 3500 years old, we glimpse a very familiar snapshot of human nature – human nature which clings to certainty – even when it diminishes God’s possibilities among us.

What is our posture to this time and this season? Are we willing to take another look at reality and possibility? Are we willing to “look toward the wilderness?” If we haven’t been willing to take a look, may we ask ourselves, “why not?” Carefully note what awaited the sojourners as they longed to be anywhere but were they were at present. As Aaron spoke words of encouragement to the faltering people, something must have caught them out of the corner of their eye...or maybe just a few looked, and more followed suit, for they looked toward the wilderness. **“They looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared...”** The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire awaited them *in the wilderness*. It hadn’t circled back around to get their attention. It waited in the wilderness. As with Moses, it was as he *turned toward* the burning bush that invitation to way forward unfolded.

Many of us find ourselves on the edge of the wilderness. The pressures of daily life seem to be growing. We may find ourselves feeling like the walls are pulling in around us and that there is not way out. We can’t return to earlier times and places in our lives, but way forward is frightening and uncertain. For tonight, in the midst of reality, let’s consider the wilderness road ahead as one of possibility. God beckons us, guides us...loves us. In faith, may we look toward the wilderness- turning together - for we journey – heart’s united - as God’s people! AMEN