

September 6, 2020

Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20

“Living in the Wilderness”

Here we are. Labor Day weekend. The end of another Summer; one of the strangest Summers in my memory. Children and teachers are either back in or preparing to return to school. During the Summer Sundays we’ve explored the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. We explored the way of salvation and the power of grace to set us free from sin and fear. Grace gives us faith that gives us freedom to love like Jesus.

Today we begin a new series I’m calling, “Living in the Wilderness.” This title came to me as I read through the Old Testament lessons for the Sundays in September and October. We’ll be walking with the Israelites in their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom. But the people must journey together through the wilderness before they are ready to enter the land God promised to them.

The Apostle Paul gives some good advice for the people as they begin their wilderness journey,

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, ... not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Romans 13:8, 10-14).

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another” is good advice for living in the wilderness. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Exodus 12:1-14 tells the story of the first Passover. It marks the beginning of the Israelite’s journey from slavery to freedom. But before they could enter the land God promised them they had to travel through the wilderness. Scripture tells us they were in the wilderness for forty years. Two key words jump out to us: “wilderness” and “forty.”

Recall in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell us immediately after Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River the Holy Spirit sent him into the wilderness. Jesus fasted and prayed for forty days. He emerged from the wilderness to begin his public ministry. The first thing he did was to go home to Nazareth, where he was invited to read the Scripture in the synagogue. The lesson for that day summarized his mission:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

The forty days in the wilderness prepared Jesus for his mission. During those days in that place the Holy Spirit was able to help Jesus know more clearly who he was and the purpose of his life.

Throughout Scripture the number "forty" represents "completion" and "maturity." A person is considered to be a full-grown adult when they reach the age of 40. When the gospel writers tell us Jesus emerged from the wilderness after 40 days, they're telling us he was "ready" to carry out his mission. He emerged from the necessary time of trial and testing that prepared him to begin the work of proclaiming the good news of Kingdom of God.

The "wilderness" is a place of testing and preparation. In the Bible God sends people into the wilderness to prepare them to join in God's mission. The wilderness is where people encounter God in a way that is not possible in the familiar surroundings of home. The wilderness is a place of vulnerability. It is where the Holy Spirit opens hearts and minds in new ways to grace. The wilderness experience changes people. They know more clearly who and whose they are. That grace and experience equips people to serve with Christ as citizens of God's kingdom in the world.

I've spent a lot of time in the wilderness of northern Minnesota called the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. When I served in Minnesota I took youth to the Boundary Waters every Summer. We'd typically go in July, after the black flies were gone. I gave the kids a list of things to bring with them. I told them to bring only what they needed because they'd have to carry everything they pack over portage trails. When you go into a wilderness like the BWCA you need to be prepared for anything: wet and dry weather, hot and cold. I told the kids we will be 200 miles away from the closest hospital, so they needed to be careful and look out for each other. They also needed to be told there will be no electricity in the wilderness. Leave your phones, video games, and hair dryers at home. The purpose of the BWCA trip was to experience community in a way that is not possible at home. The kids quickly learn the importance and value of teamwork, working together to get across a portage, prepare meals, cleaning up after meals, and hanging the food pack every day. Everyone needs to do their part if everyone is going to have a good time and get home safely. Every time I took kids into the Boundary Waters Wilderness nearly every youth was changed by the experience. Friendships were made and deepened. They had more confidence in themselves and their abilities to endure hardship. Their faith in God was also deeper and more mature. In the wilderness they learned what it meant to be completely dependent upon grace. The beauty of the place revealed God's goodness in a new way. God's goodness was also revealed in the relationships formed and deepened in the wilderness experience.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has put the world into a wilderness experience. No one knows how long we are going to be in this wilderness. I think it's a fortunate coincidence that the Revised Common Lectionary Old Testament lessons for the Sundays in September and October are all from the Book of Exodus. It tells the story of how God led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in the wilderness. During the coming weeks we will explore the meaning of living in the wilderness.

The wilderness will change us. We, and our world, will not be the same. The wilderness experience is preparing us for the world that is coming, whatever that may be. The wilderness reveals our dependence upon God and God's grace. The Baptismal Covenant equips us with all we need to endure and even thrive in the wilderness.

Bringing and wearing the right clothes is key to living in the wilderness. The Baptismal Covenant supplies us with the clothing that allows us to endure the wilderness trials. The Apostle Paul tells us, "... put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Baptism covers us in Christ who promises to "surround us with a community of love and forgiveness."

In one of his other letters Paul goes into more detail about "putting on the Christ:"

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:12-17).

Paul is elaborating on Jesus' teaching with his disciples in Matthew 18. It takes a community to get us through this wilderness time. We need one another for mutual support and accountability for living as Christ's representatives in the world. When we regularly gather in small groups Jesus tells us, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

Our Wesleyan/Methodist tradition of meeting in small groups for mutual support for growing in holiness of heart and life is needed more than ever in this wilderness time of covid-19 pandemic. I pray that you will join me in learning more about this tradition beginning Wednesday night at 6:30 pm and think about the two or three friends and neighbors you'd like to form as a Grace Group for mutual support in living as Christians in this time. Remember Jesus' promise, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Amen.