

Hope in the Desert

Lent 3A

March 27, 2011

Exodus 17:1-7

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

17:2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

17:5 The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

17:6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Romans 5:1-11

5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

5:3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

5:4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

5:5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

5:6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

5:7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

5:8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

5:9 Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.

5:10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Proclamation of the Word

You may have seen the bumper sticker, "Not all who wander are lost." I relate to that. If I have time on a trip, I like to take side-trips and wander. I like to explore, take a turn and see where the road might go. Or in the woods, it is fun to me to hear rushing water and follow the sound, so I might discover its source.

But the Hebrew children wandering in the wilderness, were not on any joy ride or day hiking in the woods. They were lost, it seemed to them. They were in a new place, following this Moses guy, placing all hope in Yahweh God who led them out of Egypt. This is no day at the beach. On top of it all they have no water while camping here at Rephidim. So they begin doing what people do. They complain.

Are we there yet? He's touching me. She touched me first!

When I think wilderness, I envision the Clemson Forest, but the Sinai wilderness is more like Death Valley, the one in California. It is a dry, rocky, desert. For forty years, the Hebrew Children wandered the desert with only an idea called the Promised Land to beckon them. They hoped for a better place. It is no coincidence that Jesus begins his ministry by spending forty days and nights being tempted and tested in the wilderness, the desert. And for those of us on a journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, the church considers the forty days of Lent as our wilderness journey. We mark time by extinguishing a candle each week acknowledging the darkness of these days even as we look forward to Resurrection when the light of Christ bursts forth from a tomb, the rock rolled away, new life and hope reborn.

But today we remember the wilderness. It is a journey we must all take to get to the Promised land, to get to resurrection and new life. I invite you during this time to remember, enter into, and experience the desert as it was experienced by people thousands of years ago. Remember the wilderness where people met God in the darkest of days. I invite you to close your eyes and picture these people of faith.

Remember the desert offered no refuge for mother and son. Distancing themselves from Abraham, they carried a single skin of water that was soon empty. Turning her back on Ishmael, Hagar could not look upon her son as she anticipated the death she could not keep at bay. A death too slow and too painful, for the wilderness was unmerciful. Thirst and sand was all they had. Death and darkness were near. (Gen. 21:14)

Feel the mother's fear. We pray for all who fear for the lives of those they love...

Remember: It was in the wilderness that the brothers surrounded the waterless pit that beckoned their father's favorite son. Here Joseph experienced jealousy's sin and desperate fear...here is where hope's extinguished flame evoked terrifying darkness. We remember Joseph's hopelessness and betrayal. (Gen. 37:22)

Sit with him in the pit. We pray for all who are stuck, desperate and alone...

In the wilderness the Hebrews wandered. Forty years their calloused feet plodded across the coarse desert ground. As the endlessly dry grains of sand matched their parched and weary souls, they cried out for deliverance. Rescue would dawn, but for now, they experienced apparent abandon. Yet, God gave them sustenance in the wilderness; manna and quail their daily bread, and water from a rock of all places.

Feel the sand under their cracked feet and the dryness of their thirsty mouths.

We pray for those among us who are empty, weary, thirsty...

The desert breathed the terrifying wind that obliterated Job's house and family. Destroying shelter and love, this forceful wind left only brokenness and desolation in its wake. As Job tore his clothes, his broken heart barely found strength to beat. The faith too which he clung seemed, at best, a stranger. (Job 1:19)

Sense the agony. We pray for those who see only loss, brokenness, heartache...

From the wilderness a voice cried, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Proclaiming and baptizing, John journeyed through wilderness depths anticipating the arrival of a savior. And the people waited. (Mark 1:3)

Wait with them. We pray for all who are holding onto hope and praying for help...

Led by the Spirit, Jesus made his way to the wilderness. Fasting and prayer was met with temptation, and here Jesus faced his greatest adversary. Refusing to change stones into bread or fall from pinnacle height for show, Jesus declined the offer of kingdoms as he awaited rescue. He countered the devil with God's words of truth and sustenance. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Picture the temptation. Imagine your own hunger and need for strength.

We pray for those who seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness...

Crazed and roaming, the man called Legion, who was imprisoned by demons, carved out an existence in a cemetery. Breaking bonds that could not hold, demons drove him to the wilderness. Though relief would come, he was unaware for now. (Luke 8:29)

See the desperation.

We pray for all who despair and are caught in a web of poverty, abuse, addiction, and emotional distress...

Today we remember the wilderness. And we remember that

- Ishmael lived and his mother was relieved.
- Joseph ruled and saved the brothers who betrayed him.
- The Hebrews entered the Promised Land after the wandering years, learning to trust God all along the way.
- Job survived and gave thanks to God.
- John prepared the way baptizing Jesus in the Jordan.
- Jesus persevered, holding fast to his call and God's word. He went on to heal the sick and lived out the kingdom of love, justice and grace.
- Legion was healed and set free.

But they each experienced desert dryness and lingered for a time in the wilderness.

We remember all God's children who are wandering in a wilderness of thirst, of suffering. This season of Lent, let us remember the wilderness. We travel the dusty road with our Savior as he made his way to Golgotha. We feel the weight of the cross. We watch the creeping darkness and the light being diminished in front of us. Knowing that Jesus has gone before us, yet travels along with us, be assured of his company. As we prepare our minds and hearts, searching the soul's depth and examining thoughts, actions, and words, may we ready ourselves for the coming resurrection.

Hear these words of faith again:

...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Romans 5:3-9)

We follow Jesus on his way to a cross these forty days of Lent.

We remember that he had to meander through towns called suffering,
endurance, and character to get to a place called hope.

We trust in a God who brings water gushing out of lifeless rock,
who brings resurrection out of death.

And God's love is poured into our hearts especially at the most barren,
emptiest times by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God, that not all who wander are lost,
and hope does not disappoint us.

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