

“The Collective Wilderness:  
Exodus 17:1-7

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March 15, 2020 - virtual worship service

Wilderness is a frequent theme that comes up in our worship life throughout the year. This is especially true during Lent when, as we mentioned last week, we honor Jesus’s forty days in the wilderness and use this season to explore our own understanding and experiences of being lost in the wilderness.

But we often talk about wilderness as an individual experience. We treat it as if it is something each one of us has experienced in our lives, but in our own time and way: battling cancer or another illness, losing a loved one, a major life transition, a season of depression or anxiety. We know these wilderness experiences intimately and what makes them even more painful is the sense of isolation and loneliness they bring. “Surely I’m the only one who is feeling this way.” “No one around me understands.” In these wilderness experiences we often wonder how we will get through - the wilderness makes it so we don’t know the way forward or the way back to where we began. Wilderness makes you think only of what you can’t have; what isn’t there. We lose sense of our rootedness in place, lose sense of the passing of time.

This metaphor of wilderness is one we go back to again and again, each time we feel lost, alone, or uncertain. I have a theory that one of the reasons why hiking and camping in the wild woods is so popular is because we like to merge metaphor with real life and believe we can build up our resiliency to the wilderness. If I can catch fish in the river or start a fire or summit the mountain, surely I can survive the next wilderness I find myself lost in. But those spiritual and emotional wildernesses call for different tools, skills we slowly learn: patience, compassion,

tenacity, the ability to slow down and, as theologian Anna of Arendelle taught us, to go on and do the next right thing.

In the story of the Hebrew people in Exodus, the wilderness began not as a metaphor but as the literal wilderness they found themselves in after fleeing from slavery in Egypt, on their way to freedom and the promised land. Wilderness was the in between time - when they knew they should be grateful to escape from slavery but they were realizing how long the journey ahead of them still was, realizing they weren't sure what that journey was going to look like or how they would get there. They thought that leaving Egypt would bring relief, but instead it turned into a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book where at every twist and turn they exclaimed, "Now what?! What else could possibly go wrong?!"

This ancient story feels a little like the past week when what was a distant concern in another country or another state quickly arrived in our home, transforming the landscape of school, work, sports, and how we socialize. Just when we would absorb the new obstacle, another piece of news or an announcement would make us cry, "What else could possibly go wrong?!"

Unlike so many other times in our lives, this is truly a collective experience. We are out here navigating the wilderness together. It may feel, tucked into the privacy of our own homes, like we are alone, but every neighbor in every house and apartment, across every city and town in this country and in most parts of the world is going through the same range of emotions, fears, uncertainties, and endless decision making. We are journeying this wilderness season as the Israelites did, together.

In the Israelite's story when Moses asks God, "What should I do with these people? They are so thirsty in this desert that they are going to kill me!" God reminds Moses that he already

has the tool he needs to lead his people to water: his staff. The same simple wooden staff Moses was holding when he first encountered God. The same staff he used to part the Red Sea and lead the Israelites to freedom. Moses already has what he needs to lead in this new kind of wilderness.

And so do we. Those same tools we used that gave us resiliency in our private wildernesses are going to be called for in this collective wilderness season. Our compassion. Our patience. Our tenacity. Our ability to do the next right thing. Each of us is equipped in different ways, with different skills and gifts that we have carried with us and will be put to use once again. We need the person who has the energy to call every family member and check in on them regularly. We need the person who has the skills to coordinate efforts to feed neighborhood kids. We need the healthcare worker for whom risking their own safety to care for others is the vocation they have practiced for decades. We need the leaders of companies and organizations who regularly make the hard decisions that no one wants to make to keep making those decisions, but this time for the sake of the common good instead of for their private gain.

It's true we have never been in this exact situation before, but we have been in the wilderness. We have been in many wildernesses. We just happen to be in this one together.

When Moses took his staff and did as God told him, he brought people along with him, the elders of Israel, to bear witness to his actions. He did his ministry in the midst of his community, knowing that he couldn't do it alone, knowing he needed their witness and wisdom to lead.

None of us should be going at this experience alone. Connect with the people in your lives who give you courage and wisdom. Call upon the people who have your back to stand beside you as you lean into your gifts and call to serve in this new wilderness. Call on the elders, for surely they know what wilderness is and how to navigate through it.

In this Exodus story, the wilderness is not over, but the Israelite's thirst is quenched. When Moses strikes the rock, water gushes out of it, and his people are able to drink. I love this image! It's not magic - it's Biblical science. Even the hardest of rocks contain life-giving water within them. What we need to survive and revive our spirits is already within us, we just have to find the right tool to access it. What we need is already present in our communities. Share our resources, call upon past wilderness experiences to equip us for a time such as this, and dig deep within ourselves until the water rushes out. You are not alone. We are not alone. We are in this together, and God is here with us all, guiding us through this new wilderness journey. May it be so. Amen.