



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Sept. 3, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Beyond the Wilderness"

Exodus 3:1-15 (NRSV)

3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 3:2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3:3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

3:4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 3:5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 3:6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

3:7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 3:8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 3:9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 3:10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

3:11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

3:12 He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

3:14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 3:15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Beyond the Wilderness

What was your wilderness this week?

For me, it was Highway 40 at 8:30 Thursday morning, where the left lane was closed for no discernable reason. The remaining 4 lanes were not adequate for what, by my estimate, were the 20,000 trucks on the road, all of us sitting together on the highway, bumper to bumper, forming a miles-long parking lot stretching through the middle of the city.

At that time, I was attempting take my daughter to preschool before work, so we were jamming out to Cocomelon. "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round." But in that wilderness, no wheels were going round and round.

What was your wilderness this week?

My wilderness was the traffic lights off exit 387, because, once I got through the traffic jam, I missed my exit 386B on Highway 40, not for the first time. So, my daughter and I found ourselves downtown where intersections are stacked on top of one another; one light stands immediately in front of another light.

And, yes, I hate to admit it, but this is church after all. At one intersection, I might have glanced at my email while waiting at a red light, until out of the corner of my eye, I saw a light turn green. So, I moved ahead, but when no other cars moved with me, I realized that it wasn't my light that had turned green. The light in the next intersection had turned green; my light was still red, so I stopped in the middle of the intersection, realizing I had just run a red light.

Luckily no cars were coming; the intersection was empty. Unluckily, after realizing what I had done, I looked up at the light pole holding the red light I had just run, and there next to the red light was one of those red-light cameras this city loves so much, staring back at me. I'm sure they got a great picture of me running my red light. It was a frustrating and expensive drive to preschool Thursday morning.

What was your wilderness this week?

Moses led his flock *beyond the wilderness* to Horeb, the mountain of God, according to the NRSV. The NIV translates it differently; it says he was "on the far side of the wilderness." The New King James translation changes it again; Moses was "at the back of the desert."

- beyond the wilderness
- on the far side of the wilderness
- at the back of the desert

It's safe to say Moses was in a remote place.

Remote in physical space, Moses was also in a remote place in his life. Last week, we left baby Moses being pulled from the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh. In the meantime, before our passage today, Moses grows up; he sees the enslavement of his people, the Hebrews. In a fit of rage one day, he murders an Egyptian who is beating one of the Hebrew slaves, and then flees after finding out that others know his crime. Ch. 2, v 15: "When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses."

In our passage today, Moses is a fugitive; he has blood on his hands; and he's a member of an enslaved people, as he takes his flock "beyond the wilderness." He comes to a mountain called Horeb, which literally translates as "Wasteland" in the Hebrew, just in case we had any confusion about the place Moses is in, physically and spiritually.

The land all to the south of Israel is wilderness. The Bible characterizes it as a place of wild animals, little vegetation, a lack of water. It is a place of scarcity, a place without the protections of life.

The wilderness is a place; it is also a metaphor in the Bible.

It is that which we cannot control;

it is a reminder that there are parts of life that we cannot control.

In our world of seeming abundance, the wilderness is never far from us today. These reminders that life is beyond your control can come upon you suddenly:

- A trip to the doctor and a new diagnosis
- A fight with a spouse or child not easily resolved
 - revealing a fissure in a relationship you had trusted
- An unexpected bill, a loss of income, a life-changing event

The wilderness reveals our vulnerability.

It is the event of sudden precarity when you thought you were secure.

Like Moses, there can be times when we live in the wilderness.

It can be the listlessness of another day, another day, another day:

- A career that takes from you far more than it gives
- A grief that seems to grow deeper rather than lighter over time
- Another day in loneliness, in depression, in addiction,
- Another day, another day of wilderness

In the Bible the wilderness is a place of vulnerability; it is also the place where God shows up.

Sometimes a burning bush appears:

“God called to Moses out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then God says to Moses, “‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”

Notice, Moses only hides his face after God tells him he is speaking to God. In other words, Moses did not know he was speaking to God when he heard the voice from the bush. For Moses did not expect to meet God in the wasteland, beyond the wilderness, in his own wilderness.

Fast forward a few verses. God tells Moses, “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have...seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” But Moses says to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Who am *I*
that *I* should go

Even speaking with God face to face. Even after discovering this is the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, Moses still thinks he is alone; that he will be alone. That's something the wilderness does. We easily mistake wilderness for isolation.

God has to remind Moses, "I will be with you."

God continues, telling Moses "I am who I am." A better translation would be "I will be who I am"; or "I am who I will be." What God is saying, in other words, is 'I will be faithful to you. As I was to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so I will be to you and to my people the enslaved Hebrews.'

So again, what was your wilderness this week?

All week, I've been seeing Facebook posts by college friends living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina who are now parents, whose children spent their first day of school this year on Monday in lockdown.

I know I am far from Chapel Hill, here in Volunteer territory, but if there are any fellow UNC alumni here, I'm sure you saw the cover of *The Daily Tarheel*, the campus newspaper, on Tuesday, the day after a graduate student shot and killed his professor on campus in the middle of a school day.¹

The paper was a long line of black and red text, taken from actual text messages from parents, checking on their kids at the school on Monday:

"Are you safe? Where are you? Are you Alone?"

"Hey – come on sweetheart – I need to hear from you."

"Stay safe and calm, we love you."

Wilderness.

- When you learn that school has started back by the news of another school shooting
 - wilderness
- When you hug your kids a little closer the day after
 - wilderness

¹ Cover. *The Daily Tarheel*. Aug. 30, 2023. Vol. 131(16). Dailytarheel.com

- When you find out that people were targeted earlier the week, by another madman with a gun, this time in Florida, for the color of their skin
 - wilderness
- When violence erupts regularly, seemingly without end, and the halls of power in this country long ago stopped pretending like they would do anything to stop it
 - wilderness

Wilderness all around.

We might ask for a burning bush, to remind us of the God who told Moses “I will be with you.”

But instead, what we find, is a table. (*walk to table*)

The Spirit of God resides with us in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. But it’s not just the bread; it’s not just the cup. God is present in the Body of Christ, which is each and every one of you, in the way we come together, the way we are with one another, in the sharing of this meal, in Christ’s name.

The Body of Christ is truly present in this meal, for we are the Body of Christ, in the mysterious way the Spirit binds us one to another and to this world.

No, we may not get a burning bush, but at this table, we hear that same promise, “I will be with you.”

God’s promise to you in your wilderness.

In our community’s wilderness.

In this world’s wilderness.

At this table we are the Body of Christ,

Not because we are perfect people; the Spirit’s promise is not something we earn.

But rather, we trust that everywhere 2 or 3 are gathered, Christ is here. Because Christ promises to be here, at this table, Connecting us. Freeing us. Empowering us:

- to be with one another in the trials and joys of this life.
- to work together for a more just and equitable world.
- to listen always together for God's voice, leading this community forward into the unknown future.

We do not get a burning bush. But that does not mean we are alone. Do not mistake wilderness for solitude.

Christ is here.

Christ is here (point to table)

Christ is here (point to congregation).

Amen