

With Us On The Way

Sermon 8 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 3, 2019

Exodus 34: 29 – 35

Truth be told, I've never spent much time in the wilderness. In fact, I really like to avoid it as much as I can. Sure, there's a certain romance about being outdoors: feeling the sun and the wind, listening to birds chirping, squirrels rustling leaves as they scurry along. It can be very therapeutic. But when you spend more than a few hours outdoors, also known as the wilderness, you start to notice, well... the bugs. I love the great outdoors, but unlike my 5-year-old emerging entomologist, I do not like bugs. The idea of one crawling into my mouth or across my face while I'm sleeping has kept me far away from tents and all other versions of long-term wilderness experiences.

Nana Bridges always told me there were two kinds of camping. Camping outside and camping at the Holiday Inn... she was a Holiday Inn kind of camper. But Grandma Tatum taught me another kind of camping. Airstream camping. I will always remember those weekends up at Palmetto Cove, an Airstream campground near Caesar's Head in the mountains of South Carolina. Every summer the campground hosted "grandchildren's weekend" when all the kids would come up and stay in the campers. There wasn't much to do except learn to play skip-bo and explore the mountain stream that ran behind the campground.

When I married into Justin's family, I learned about yet another kind of camping. Tent camping. This is for folks looking for a real wilderness experience! His version of my "grandchildren's weekend" was a week-long outdoor excursion into the mountains of New Mexico. His grandparents would pack tents and food supplies that would keep them dry and last for the duration of the trip.

There are many different kinds of wilderness.

This morning we meet Moses in the wilderness. And this was not Moses' first experience in the wild. Remember the encounter with the burning bush and the red sea? This particular wilderness experience however, is the one that takes the cake. For forty years after their liberation from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

For the Hebrew people the wilderness was an inhospitable dwelling. The daily portions of manna and quail that God provided grew old as the reality of the promised land loomed too far in the distance. Many reflected upon their days in Egypt, saying, "at least we had plenty to eat and drink" (Ch. 16). But the wilderness was also a safe haven, where the Hebrews were free from the oppression of Pharaoh. Throughout their wilderness journey, the people were led by God working through the elements of nature. A pillar of cloud or fire guided them on their way.

They might have known the creation stories of a God who hovers over the wild, stirring up creation and making order out of chaos. Or maybe they had heard the story of Hagar who escapes into the wilderness and is met by God out there. It appears, at least according to the Hebrew story, that Yahweh is a God who lives and moves and acts in the wilderness.

If Moses and his people knew these stories then they might have known that God was in the midst of something, that God was leading them toward something, or at very least, that God would deliver on the promise of freedom in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Wilderness is an on-the-way kind of place. In the Biblical story it is not a final destination, rather, it is the setting for the journey. It is unpredictable and undefined. And yet we have learned from the ancient stories that God meets us there, in the wild.

I wonder if any of us have learned this in our lives – that God meets us in our own wilderness?

There are many different kinds of wilderness.

Wilderness can look like a cancer diagnosis or an inconclusive test. It can look like underemployment and financial uncertainty. It can look like entering into a difficult conversation with someone you love. Or it can look like taking a step of faith and leaving the comfort of home.

Hagar left Abram's homestead in Canaan and was *seen* by God in the wild, away from camp. Moses left his place at Pharaoh's palace and found God in the burning bush. The Hebrew people left Egyptian captivity and saw God's own presence in the parting of the Red Sea and in the pillars of cloud and fire that led them. Each of them following God's calling away from what was known and into the wilderness.

The Israelites were tested along the way. They grew weary because the journey was long (remember, two rounds of forty years) and from time to time, they lost sight of the dream, they lost hope in the promised land. They acted out and failed to uphold their end of the covenant. But God did not leave them to wander alone, God provided them with a leader, Moses. And during their Exodus journey, Moses would meet with God. Sometimes in his tent outside of camp and sometimes up on Mount Sinai.

Today's reading finds Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the renewed covenant, the tablets upon which the final version of the ten commandments were inscribed. His face shone radiantly because he had been in the presence of God. Just like the burning bush, the pillar of fire, and the pillar of cloud, the shining face of Moses became a visual representation of the presence of God in the wilderness.

When I was a teenager and would attend youth retreats, we would often talk about the mountain top experiences. I can remember going away and feeling close to God. The

challenge for me became remembering that feeling, that closeness with God, and trying to find ways to maintain that level of spiritual connection.

As an adult it seems harder to get away, to find mountain tops of rest, renewal, and communion with God. To make matters worse, the wildernesses of life seem to be growing. There are daily responsibilities and important decisions to be made. There are financial, social, and professional stressors. The world seems far more complex and disappointing than it once did... the wild and untamed wilderness of life feels like it is growing as fast as a kudzu vine blocking the path to the mountain top where God is waiting with a promise of hope and path to the promised land.

I imagine that you feel some of this too, in your own lives.

There are many different kinds of wilderness and sometimes it's difficult to know where God is or how God is working.

I can remember one airstream adventure with the Tatum grandparents. My sister and I were loaded into a suburban which was pulling a 26-foot airstream camper through the mountains. I had a window seat and I remember going around tight curves and watching the camper move into my view from the side window. I wondered if it could make the sharp turns or if it would fall off the side of the mountain, pulling the suburban (and us) with it. I will never forget feeling like I was about to die, but I will also never forget the ways that Grandma Tatum would turn around and assure me that while I was scared, while I was uncertain, while I couldn't believe we would make it to the other side... she and Grandpa had been here before. They'd driven these roads, they'd pulled this trailer, they knew what they were doing, and they would be with us the whole way.

The confidence in her voice and the miles on that old suburban stood as proof for me that we would indeed survive the wilderness of these mountain roads. They were visual representations that my guides, Grandma and Grandpa Tatum, had been here before and they gave me hope that we would get through this alive, together.

In the same way, the face of Moses reminded his people that they would get through their wilderness together. That God had been there before and that God would deliver them to their destination.

Grandma and Grandpa Tatum have been gone for over ten years now. They are no longer driving that Suburban pulling an airstream and guiding us through the wilderness of the Carolina mountains.

You can probably remember some of your own wilderness guides – family members, wise friends, saints of this church even, who have led you through the most difficult moments of wilderness in your personal lives and in the life of this church. Like the face of Moses and the confident assurance of my grandparents, these guides have stood to remind us that

we are not the first to traverse these challenging paths, we are not the only ones to question if we will make it through and most importantly that we are not alone.

With both Moses and the saints from our past gone I wonder whose face is shining with the radiance of the Spirit? I wonder where those pillars of cloud and fire might be for us as we embark on our wilderness journeys.

And then I remember our mission statement: “where every member is a minister” and I’m reminded that we are all guides to one another. We are all called to meet God on the mountain and to radiate the presence of God to one another.

We may not be able to get away on retreat for forty days at a time like Moses did. But we certainly have opportunities to experience God’s presence, one glimpse at a time. Just yesterday I saw it as our children gathered to plant lettuce in the church garden. Their excitement and joy and confidence that God was using them to feed the world. It shone on their faces and reminded the adults that God is with us in the faces of our children.

I saw it two weeks ago as Nancy Register and Deanna Choplin spoke to the Wednesday night crowd about Buddy Break and the ways that it has changed their lives. As Deanna spoke, her radiance shone throughout the room and reminded us that God is with us and God is using us to be a ray of hope for those in need of renewal.

You may not know it but your faces shine with radiance as you tell the stories of your work in Lumberton, as you remember the largest crock-pot-cookoff in your history, as you receive new members into the church, and as you support one another in the day-to-day struggles of life. You are radiant with love for one another and you may not know it but you serve as a visible reminder that God is with us in this wilderness.

There are many different kinds of wilderness, but no matter how long the journey we are in it together. There will be moments along the way for each of us when we cannot see the path forward. But in those moments, we can look at the faces of our fellow travelers and see the radiance of God’s presence and the reality of God’s promise that we are not alone.