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Exodus 17:1-7

## WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

There is more than one way to get to the wilderness. For the Hebrew people, they physically entered the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt. That is where their escape led them: out into the dry, barren, desert.

Usually for us, however, the wilderness comes *to* us in the form of hardships and trials, and struggles. For us, the wilderness is often more of an emotional or psychological time of barrenness and emptiness—perhaps when a relationship falls apart, or when facing a health crisis, or when losing a job, or when a global pandemic descends upon our world, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives in our nation alone, disrupting livelihoods, cutting us off from one another, and subjecting us all to a daily dose of uncertainty and unpredictability. Add to that the social and political upheaval taking place in our country and it feels like we are in a very barren, harsh, and brutal place.

Just as there is more than one way to get *into* a wilderness experience, there is also more than one way to *journey* in the wilderness. None of us likes being in the wilderness, but when we find ourselves there, how do we undertake the journey through that harsh land? What will our journey look like?

According to the biblical accounts, the Hebrew people really struggled in their wilderness wanderings. One of the things we notice from the biblical stories is that they complained a lot. They complained when the desert water was too bitter to drink, and they complained when they didn't have food, and then in today's reading they complained when there was no water at all to

be found. In fact, their complaining bordered on violence because Moses feared that the angry people would stone him to death.

No one likes to be around complainers very much, but when you stop to think about it, the Hebrew people's complaints were quite legitimate. They needed food to eat and they needed clean water to drink. And when you are thirsty and in a hot desert and can't find any water to drink, you probably have good reason to complain. These are basic necessities for life. At the root of the Hebrew people's complaining lay anxiety. They were anxious. They were anxious for themselves and they were anxious for their children and loved ones.

Just like we are in our wilderness time. We can relate to feelings of anxiety. Is there any one of us who is not feeling anxious these days? We are concerned about our own health and the health of our family members. We wonder if it is safe to travel to see loved ones. We worry about our loved ones who have to work in proximity to others. We are anxious about our financial wellbeing and the overall economic status of our nation. We are burdened by the incidents of racism and violence. We are anxious about the upcoming election and the uncertainty of what happens *after* the election. All of these anxieties are very understandable.

During their wilderness wanderings, the Hebrew people were anxious. And while their anxiety is understandable, anxiety is not a helpful or meaningful way to journey through the wilderness. Anxiety can turn people inward and make people selfish. And anxiety can lead people to act aggressively—as Moses feared the people would do. And anxiety can hinder our ability to recognize the life-sustaining presence of God around us.

The people complained to Moses about their thirst and then Moses complained to God—which is also something we may be able to relate to. I've done my fair share of complaining to God about the wilderness we all find ourselves in. And that is also biblically faithful. Just read

the Psalms if you want to find people who complain to God about their circumstances and cry out for help.

And after hearing Moses' complaint, God tells Moses to strike the rock at Mt. Horeb with his staff. Moses does as God commands and water gushes forth from the rock. Now, think about a rock. A rock is a substance that is completely devoid of life. But God breaks it open and from it flows life-saving water. No one would ever suggest that someone should look for water from a rock. But that is precisely where God's life-saving gift came from for those thirsty Hebrews out there in the wilderness.

What about us? As we wander through our own wilderness time, where might we find God's life-giving presence? Do we even look for the water in the desert? Do we even expect to find where God is making the water flow for us? Or are we merely wandering around in despair and anxiety, burdened by the circumstances of life?

Our natural inclination when we find ourselves in a wilderness time is to want to get the heck out of that situation as fast as possible. That of course is not always possible. The Hebrew people didn't yet know it at the time of our story today, but their wilderness experience would last 40 years! And while we can only pray that our wilderness time will not last 40 years, it is clear that the ramifications from the pandemic are going to be with us for a while yet. And who knows how long our political and social turmoil and the cultural divide in this nation will endure. It is rare for the wilderness moments in our personal lives to vanish quickly. So it is not always possible to escape the wilderness. Instead, we usually must wander in the wilderness for some time.

But the question before us is, *how* shall we wander? If our wandering is only filled with despair and anxiety, if we encounter the wilderness only with complaining and the distress that

comes from not being able to escape from it, we run the risk of missing the holy presence of God with us. All of us are grateful when life is good and our families are healthy, and our careers are rising. But God is often best known in the wilderness. We can wander in despair, or we can look for and seek the life-giving presence of God that come from a moment of beauty, an act of kindness, a gesture of compassion, an occasion for generosity, an opportunity for solidarity. The scriptures remind us that even in life-less places, even from life-less structures, God brings forth that which sustains us.

I wonder what this wilderness time might reveal to you and to me and to our nation. What if we are the rock? What if we are those life-less structures and this hard and harsh time we are going through provides an occasion when God can break us open to let something life-giving emerge: like justice, like compassion, like mercy, or equitable and affordable health care, or gentler hearts, or simpler ways of living, or the re-evaluation of our priorities.

The Hebrew people's time in the wilderness was a very hard and challenging time. But it was also a defining time for them. It shaped who they were as a people. And it cemented their relationship with God.

Like you, I am eager for our wilderness time to be over. But here we are for the foreseeable future. And God is never closer than when we are in the wilderness. How shall we wander in this time? In anxiety—anxiety that cuts us off from one another, that produces nothing that is constructive or meaningful, that blinds us to God's holy presence? Or shall we wander seeking the ways God is providing water in our desert? Could this hard wilderness time be an occasion when God breakd you open so that something amazingly wonderful can come forth from you, and you become the hope that sustains a thirsty people?