

“In-Between”

(Exodus 16)

The word ‘wilderness’ is not an emotionally neutral word, for it brings to mind experiences from our lives when we have left the safety and security of our home and ventured out into the unknown of creation. Now, for some, this is a great adventure, awakening their inner-Thoreau about the beauty and marvels of nature. For this group, the word ‘wilderness’ brings to mind images of sitting under a vast sea of stars, watching flames of a campfire flicker and dance, singing *Kumbaya* or *All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir*, while enjoying a s’more that leaves a sticky residue on their fingers and then wake up the next morning with smoke still lingering in their hair and clothes and a smile on their faces. For others, the word ‘wilderness’ awakens memories of trying to sleep on the unforgiving ground with a stone poking in their back, and they are sure they heard the rustling of a bear outside the thin, nylon tent and while all God’s critters many indeed have a place in the choir, it would be really good if they sung somewhere else, far, far away. And then it starts to rain, soaking their sleeping bag, filling their humble dwelling as drips rhythmically fall upon their face.

Now, here is the rub, both experiences are valid and true. The ‘wilderness’ is a place of awesome beauty, with the fingerprints of God’s handiwork evident. Many of you here discovered or deepened your faith in the wilderness, in creation. Among the cathedral of towering trees, or the warmth of the sun baptized or the feeling of breaking through the water surface with the coolness of a lake evaporated off your skin making you feel alive and awake and aware. The wilderness can be a place where you feel steeped in the sacred. But, the wilderness is also a place of vulnerability. Sudden storms leave us feeling exposed and without shelter to protect us, we encounter creepy, crawling creatures that can cause harm, we can get lost and come face to face with dangerous situations. Like oil and water; these two realities sit on top of each other. The problem is we can end up couching these two opinions as the romantics verses the realists, each convinced their position is correct; neither willing to see the truth both bring. The wilderness is a place where we can feel defenseless and unprotected. The wilderness is a place where we can feel how small we are, forced to face our powerlessness, and mortality. So, while we all feel the loss of control in the wilderness, for some that sensation draws them closer to God and for others they feel God more distant.

The Israelites found themselves one month into the wilderness and all those emotions we can feel swirling and surging within them. They felt the elation of freedom. They felt the vulnerability of new, unfamiliar, somewhat scary surroundings. One month into the wilderness, not knowing it would take forty years, they began to wonder if they were being led by Moses or just wandering. Where exactly was the promise land and why aren’t they there yet. The wilderness, for all the images this brings to mind, is also about being in-between. This is true not only for Moses and the Israelites in-between what was known in Egypt and what will be in the promise land; but also as you keep turning the pages of scripture. Elijah flees to the wilderness in fear, and finds himself in-between feeling the power of defeating the gods of Baal in a mountain top showdown and powerlessness to face the queen who is *mad*. Jesus goes to the wilderness in-between his baptism and his public ministry. Jesus goes to the wilderness, the garden, in-between sharing an intimate meal with his closest friends and publically confronting the powers who misunderstood his ministry.

The wilderness is a metaphor for being in-between, which is not exactly the place where most of us ever want to be. We talk about being in-between jobs or in-between relationships or in-between a rock and a hard place. And what we are naming is that we find ourselves in a place where what was, is no longer helpful or possible and what is to be is unknown or uncertain. Being in-between is a wilderness moment and a moment when anxiety can take hold of us. We want to get to our final

destination. We want to be in a place that does not feel so uncertain, so vulnerable, or so “wildernessy”. And while proverbs about ‘life being about the journey, not the destination’; ‘to sit back and enjoy the ride’ sound so good on post-it notes, the reality is friends, being in-between can be a very difficult place and time. This week, I celebrated my 35th birthday, which is exactly half-way in-between 30 and 40. And I feel somewhat in-between. I am no longer part of the coveted target demographic for Nielson ratings or marketing, unless you count the toy companies to buy things for my kids. Yet, most folks look at 35 with a slight smirk that I am not quite old enough yet, especially in this profession where my presence still skews the average age downward and I am a bit of anomaly. But, I also sense that as a church, we are a people on the move in the wilderness, in-between. Things are not quite the same as when I came, in a good way. We are trying new ways of worshiping, new hymns this Lent, different ways of meeting and ministry. I sense we are as a community in-between.

When the Israelites found themselves in-between what was known in Egypt and what could not yet be seen, what felt far away, this so called promise land; they grumbled. They were hungry and their feet were tired, why couldn’t Moses just pull off and ask for directions. They complained. We know from our own experience the power of complaining as a way to get results. Through college I worked as a customer service representative, listening to grumbling all day. And in some ways, we might think our scripture lesson today coupled with our own experiences, validate the grumbling path as faithful. But, friends, we miss the irony of this passage. When the Israelites complain for food, God offers manna. Now, for all that we think of manna as bread from heaven, for all that we spiritualize manna as this great gift, manna has all the nutritional value of a s’more. Manna is a honey-like deposit. It is a by-product from an insect digesting sap from trees that crystallizes and falls to the ground. Sounds tasty, right? I think I’ll stick with s’mores. Yet, manna will not sustain you it gives you a sugar rush. In some ways friends, the Israelites’ complaint does not yield something substantive; God’s response is ironic, even a little sarcastic.

So, if we find ourselves, like the Israelites in our collective journey, in-between where we were and where we might go. If we find ourselves feeling a little anxious, hungry for the security of knowing exactly what tomorrow will bring and exactly how we are going to get there rather than just wandering, almost aimlessly around the wilderness of today, we might also be tempted to grumble. Yet, how often do the responses to our complaints really solve the problem, especially when the problems are complex. How often does grumbling really give voice to our deepest hunger and thirst? How often does the response someone offers us for our grumbling really satisfy us? Or is the response often like manna, a bit surface level and lacking substance to sustain us in the journey.

So, in-between what we’ve known and what we will become, stuck in the middle, wondering when we will arrive and how will we know for sure can be a place of anxiety. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are. When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, “here, I guess, since this is where I am.”¹ Being in-between can be good. Being in-between can be holy. Being in-between can lead us to proclaim, here I am Lord with a smile on our face and hope in our voices. Here I am, it is good to be here. I give thanks this day, that I am in-between and that we are in-between. And I invite us, as much as we are able, to set aside feelings of where we think we ought to be or what we think should be or even what was; and instead encourage each other

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 56

to stay open and present and aware of God here and now, even if we are not completely sure where here is or what now entirely means. We can exert so much energy looking behind us and straining our eyes toward what is coming that we miss what is around us.

So may you notice what is around you. May you notice what is around us as a church community. And may we find moments this day and this week as we gaze and see the ways we are steeped in the sacred. For I sense the grace and love and peace of God right here, I give thanks for your presence at this in-between place I find myself, and I proclaim with full voice, it is good to be here. Thanks be to God, and let the people of God say, "Amen."