

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

October 11, 2020, The 19th Sunday of Pentecost/The 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Exodus 33:12-23, I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Messages in the Wilderness

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

This morning's reading from Exodus takes place after the Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for months. They have left Egypt behind and they are moving toward God's Promised Land. When they came to Mt. Sinai Moses went up the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments on two tablets of stone. But these things take time, and Moses was gone for 40 days and 40 nights, which is the way the Old Testament says "a really long time."

When Moses finally comes down Mt. Sinai, he finds that the people have given up on him and God and they have melted down their gold and created a golden calf. In the midst of great partying they are worshiping the golden calf as their new god. The rage of Moses, and more importantly God, have great repercussions.

Finally, God says to Moses that it is time to continue on to the Promised Land; it is time to start walking again. What we hear in this morning's passage is Moses pushing God to name if God will still be with them after everything that has happened. Basically, Moses says to God, "so now what happens?" Listen for the Word of God.

Wandering around feeling lost, not sure where to go next.

Nothing looks familiar; it hasn't looked familiar for months, some would even say decades.

Longing for the good old days, even when the good old days weren't so good for some people.

Large groups of people have done things you never thought they'd do.

People have obviously turned away from God's ways.

God used to make sense, but not so much anymore.

So now what do we do, where do we go, who is going to lead us, who will go with us?

It's been over 3,000 years since Moses wandered through the wilderness with the Israelite people, and yet the questions they were asking then have a familiar ring now, don't they?

While the life situations that leave us wandering in the wilderness are shaped by our own time in world history,

and our own personal stories,

wilderness wandering times raise a lot of the same questions,

and have a lot of the same emotions.

The Bible says that Moses and God used to meet together in a tent away from the camp and God would speak to Moses "as one speaks to a friend." (Exodus 33:11)

It takes trust to push back at a friend and say, "so what are you doing?!"

But that's what Moses was asking in the passage we just read.

Moses says: "you told me to bring this people out of the desert to the Promised Land, but you haven't said who is going to help me do that now!"

"You said these people all around me are your people, but how will anyone know that if you don't go with us?"

Moses, out in the middle of the wilderness is basically saying to God: "So what are you going to do? Are you going the rest of the way with us or not?" Are we alone here in this wilderness, or are you with us for the journey?

Moses's questions are a gift for us, whether we feel like we are in the wilderness now, or for the next time we feel like we are wandering in the wilderness. Three thousand years ago Moses asked questions and, because of God's response, I believe we can borrow his question when the wilderness is pushing in on us too.

It may feel a bit daring, or rude, or something your grandma would tell you not to do, but I believe that we can speak in our own wilderness wanderings and ask the same questions:

"So, God, what are you going to do? Are you going the rest of the way with us or not? Are we alone here in this wilderness, or are you with us for the journey?"

See: Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Fretheim, Terence E., *Exodus*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991, p. 297.5

The reason I think this question is a gift is because its honest. Its scary to be in the wilderness.

It's scary to have nothing feel familiar.

It's scary to miss the good old days, and know they aren't coming back.

It's scary to watch large groups of people do things you never thought they'd do.

It's scary to feel like people have turned away from God's ways, or we have turned away from God's ways.

It's scary to ask out loud: now what do we do, where do we go, who is going to lead us, who will go with us?

It's scary to feel like God used to make sense to us, but not so much anymore.

Into the midst of our fear Moses invites us to be honest and ask the question that's rising out of our fear:

"So, God, what are you going to do? Are you going the rest of the way with us or not? Are we alone here in this wilderness, or are you with us for the journey?"

Listen to what God said to Moses that day in the wilderness when Moses was honest enough to ask his questions. God said to Moses: "I know you by name, and you have found favor in my sight...My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."

Moses, whose honesty continues, asks another question, "Show me your glory, I pray." Scholars think what Moses is saying here is "show me your "self," your most true self." Moses has seen God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, and now Moses is saying, "let me really see you, all of you." "Here is this wilderness, show me your face."

If we are going to take Moses as a teacher in the life of faith, he is going to push us to what may be new levels of honesty with our God.

And God's response is interesting. God doesn't judge Moses for asking this, God doesn't say no, God doesn't say "Enough already Moses what are you thinking?"

Instead God answers in God's way, and offers Moses even more than he is asking for. Instead of saying "yes, I will show you my glory," God says "Yes, I will show you all my goodness."

"I will let you see what kind of God I am."

I, the God who will lead you, and my people, out of the wilderness to the Promised Land, I want you to see my goodness."

Then God goes on to explain that not only will God show Moses God's goodness but God will proclaim to Moses God's name: "Yahweh."

“Yahweh,” the name God told Moses at the burning bush at the beginning of this exodus, when Moses asked “who should I tell the Pharaoh has sent me to ask for the people’s freedom.”

Yahweh, the name that means: “I am.” “I am who I am,” “I will be who I will be.”

See *Interpretation*, Ibid, p. 299.

Up on the mountain, out there in the wilderness, God placed Moses in a cleft of the rock, covered Moses with God’s hand and passed by. Moses didn’t see God’s face; Moses saw God’s goodness. And Moses did get to look after God had walked by. God protected Moses from what would have hurt him, and showed Moses more than he had asked for.

God, in that moment on the mountain, wasn’t a silent presence but a speaking presence, who spoke out loud God’s true name: “I am.”

“I am.”

“I am active and present here in this moment.”

“I am active and present and speaking in your history and the history of my people.”

“I am not a distant God, I am here, speaking now.”

“In my goodness, I am here, I am with you.”

“I know you by name, and you have found favor in my sight”

“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 114OT,
note for Exodus 3:14. “The name does not indicate God’s eternal being but God’s action
and presence in historical affairs.”

See also *Interpretation*, Ibid, p. 298, Moses, in vv. 15-16 is seeking to find out if God “is...in fact a *dwelling* presence?”

Yahweh, the great “I Am,” continues to be the God who dwells with God’s people.

Yahweh, continues to be our God who finds wilderness wanderers and walks with them.

So, when you are ready, when it is time, if you need them, you can borrow Moses’s questions and make them your own:

“So, God, what are you going to do? Are you going the rest of the way with us or not?

Are we alone here in this wilderness, or are you with us for the journey?”

The promise of our God who meets us in the wilderness, is that God will speak to us, because God’s goodness has always been the same, and the message is for all of God’s chosen children.

This message is for you and for me:

“I know you by name, and you have found favor in my sight...

My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”