

Exodus 16:2-15
“On the Lookout”

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The Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading: Exodus 16:2-15

Introductory Piece: Children, please gather ‘round for the Bible story. This fall, we are listening to the stories from the book of Exodus about how God freed the Hebrew people from slavery. Today the story tells us about how they traveled through the wilderness and what happened when they were hungry.

The Story:

After they crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites were in the wilderness. The wilderness was not a forest like here in New England, nor just sand like the Sahara, but more like a wild high desert with rocks and low plants. The people had to camp and live off the land. This was very different from their former life in Egypt, and they wondered how they would survive long term.

So when they felt hungry, they got upset and complained against Moses and his brother Aaron who were leading them: “We wish we were still in Egypt. We were enslaved, but at least we got our fill from the leftovers of meat and bread there. Have you brought us out here to die?!”

God made a promise to Moses, Aaron, and the people: “I have heard your complaining. I am going to ‘rain’ bread from heaven for you. Each day you will find enough to eat for each day. Then on Friday, you’ll gather enough to tide you over two days, so that you can worship and rest on the Sabbath day. You will also know that I am God and that I am providing for you, because in the evening, I will send you meat. I am the Lord your God.”

The congregation looked toward the wilderness, and God’s shining glory appeared in the cloud that was leading them. In the evening, quails flew in and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew lifted, on the surface of the wilderness, they found a fine, flaky substance, and they asked one another: “What is it?” which in Hebrew is “Manna.” They didn’t know what it was, but Moses told them: “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.” They ate it all along their journey through the wilderness.

“The wilderness” is an ambiguous place in the Bible, viewed both negatively and positively, but mostly negatively. As a geographic location, this semi-arid desert can be a

home to some plants and animals, but humans avoid settling in it, because the wilderness is “parched, inhospitable, and dangerous.”¹

Even so, Moses found serenity and heard a call from God in the wilderness. He led the escaping Israelites back there, and once they’d taken stock of this new environment, they realized: “We’re not in Kansas anymore!” John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey from the wilderness before coming to baptize at the Jordan. Jesus found the wilderness to be a severe site of temptation, yet during his ministry, he always returned there to pray.

In the bible, “Wilderness” is also a metaphor: a situation or state of being, in which you and I feel out of our element, lost, totally dependent upon God. The wilderness is a wild and beautiful, but frightening period of discomfort and uncertainty, one that may also, *potentially*, get us in spiritual shape, prepared for a more positive future.

These days are you and I in the wilderness, either personally or collectively? I imagine that those in California who are looking at their homes in ashes, and those in the path of still another hurricane would probably respond, “Yes!” Those who are exhausted by racism and violence might agree. Politics and the pandemic also contribute to this feeling. If you find yourself constantly shaking your head, or rolling your eyes at the news, and asking of our current situation, “What *is* this?!” then you’re in the wilderness: “a country where the lights are low and the ways are hard to find,” as the poet puts it.²

Despite their confusion, however, when they were in the wilderness, the Israelites *were* able to recognize certain things. They were able to recognize that they were hungry. They had that gnawing, empty feeling, that rumbling in the stomach. They lacked nourishment and the prospect of having enough to eat. The food around them was so different from what they were used to, and the cupboard was actually bare.

During this COVID economy, through our Food Pantry, Rosemary Braverman and her volunteers have been handing out food to 150 to 200 people per week as compared to 60 before virus unemployment struck.

What about you? You can raise your hand if you are feeling physically, emotionally, or spiritually hungry.

The other day, Carol Lucas introduced me to a new word: “hangry.” This is the irritation that comes out when you haven’t eaten: hungry *and* angry. After all, there are some situations, right? when we need more than a Snickers bar! We’re “hangry.”

When they were in the wilderness, the Israelites also recognized that they were upset. They pined for the olden days and complained about the present. “You’ve led us into freedom, but it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. What’s the plan, man?!”

Today there’s a lot to complain about and to march for, and so many wrongs to right. **Are *you* feeling upset? If so, you can raise your hand.**

Like our forebears in the faith, I wish that we weren’t in the wilderness, but it’s exactly then and there that you and I need to be on the lookout for God’s blessings.

¹S. Talmon, “Wilderness,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplemental Volume (Nashville:

²Bonaro Overstreet.

You see, like the Israelites, we don't usually recognize the quail and the manna God gives us so that we can keep going. "What is it?" we ask. The gift is right before our eyes, but it doesn't look like the meat and bread that we are used to, or that we want, and someone like Moses has to identify it as the blessing of food, comfort, and survival that *God* has provided.

Where are the quail and the manna today? Maybe we don't recognize it, but the right to vote is a blessing in today's wilderness. This is also National Coming Out Day. So many people walk through life not being true to themselves. What a blessing it is in *this* kind of wilderness when they are met with acceptance!

I also now think about my cancer diagnosis in light of this faith story, and I think that it is the beginning of a kind of wilderness too. At first, I didn't see any good therein! I may yet feel periods of frustration, but my eyes have been opened to the fact that the treatment will keep me on *this* side of life! Then beyond this, I remembered two women I admire – church leaders in an early congregation – who were breast cancer survivors. I wish I wasn't in this wilderness, but I recognize that there will be gifts from God and it will become a blessing if it makes me a better person like them!

Today's wilderness, whatever it is, is exactly the time for *all of us* to be on the lookout for quail and manna. God's blessing is coming! Indeed, it's already here!