

Getting Your Bearings

Exodus 16:2-15

My more jaded parishioners out there will probably share in my surprise when you learn that, despite what you probably thought, marketing executives were not, in fact, the ones who came up with the idea of “Christmas in July” as a ploy to get us to spend our hard-earned dollars when there wasn’t a bona fide holiday for months. They just knew a good idea when they saw one. No, in fact, according to that most reliable of sources, Wikipedia, the first-ever recorded celebration of Christmas in July took place in 1933 just over the mountains from here at Camp Keystone, near the Pisgah National Forest. And that makes sense, when you think about the perennial challenge of trying to keep campers entertained in constructive ways, and the endless options that present themselves when your camp is located in spitting distance of a bunch of Christmas tree farms. You can occupy them for hours, days, making ornaments for the tree, little snow men out of Borax soap flakes, and drinking hot chocolate when it’s hot enough outside to roast marshmallows on the foursquare court.

Today’s Old Testament reading presents us with another idea for an incongruous observance: Lent in September. Just like Christmas in July, only a lot less fun.

Every year at the beginning of Lent, of course, we hear the story about how Jesus was baptized, and then either driven or led by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness where he spends 40 days being tested and prepared for his ministry. That is not so different from the wilderness experience that the Israelites find themselves in, now midway through their second month since crossing the sea out of Egypt and out of slavery.

Anyone who knows anything about Middle Eastern geography and nothing about the Bible would probably have advised Moses to get himself a GPS unit. It shouldn’t have been that hard to get from the Nile delta to Canaan. Even I could probably do it, and that’s saying something. Honestly, all you have to do is follow the coastline up and you’re there. It’s maybe a couple hundred miles, but it’s doable. Not rocket science.

But Moses takes them the scenic route. In fact, he doesn’t even take the back roads; he goes just the opposite direction. He crosses over into the Sinai Peninsula and heads south. He follows the coastline, just the wrong coastline, going on down to the tip of the peninsula and then back up, makes a big loop around in what is now southern Israel, and then heads northeast into modern day Jordan before finally crossing over into Canaan. The trip that should have taken weeks takes decades. But that’s a different story. Today’s story isn’t about the duration of the journey, but the very first days of it.

What the non-biblical scholar who thinks Moses should get a GPS doesn’t know, is that he has one. He wasn’t the one blazing that trail at all. God was. God was the one who led them this roundabout way into the middle of nowhere. The wilderness. The place where there is no water, no food, an untold number of threats to their existence. They get out in the middle of the wilderness and realize that, by comparison, their lives in Egypt were pretty cushy. At least they had beds to sleep in and a roof over their heads to protect them from anything that stings, bites, or claws; at least they had food to eat and they knew what to expect every day when they woke

up. Life may not have been great, but at least they were surviving and sure of what tomorrow held. And even though they hated the Egyptians, they knew where they stood with them. In the wilderness, they never knew what tomorrow held, or where they might find water next, or what unexpected and unwelcome thing might be just around the next corner.

I think that's the real definition of 'wilderness.' Uncertainty. Not knowing what lies ahead, what tomorrow holds, and not being able to do a darned thing about it. As both a chaplain and a pastor I've heard that from countless people during that span of time between knowing that you are sick, and knowing what is wrong and what the future holds. It's the not knowing that is the hardest. We can deal with what we know. We can steel ourselves for almost any hardship that life throws at us, so long as long we can map out what resources we will need and what the cost will be, physically, emotionally, whatever.

I think that's the real reason the Israelites whined and complained. Anxiety. Not knowing. Was life as good as they said it was back in Egypt? No. So, had they just forgotten in six weeks time how miserable they were? No. They were anxious, nervous about what lay ahead. They were out of their element, not in control, insecure. So they complained. I can't begin to explain why we do that. It doesn't help, but for some reason it seems to be easier for us to gripe than to say, hey, I'm really nervous here.

Some of you remember that, not long after I came here, I got what I thought was the bright idea to have cookies and coffee in the library after church on Sunday. That way we could visit with our visitors instead of rushing out the door to our lunches. It seemed like a pretty simple thing, so I was completely unprepared for the fur that started flying. Some people said that they had already had coffee during Sunday School, and that we didn't need to have coffee again. Others wanted to know what committee would be in charge of this, and if memory serves me, the prevailing thought was that it should be Property, for reasons that still escape me. This went on for months. I was completely stymied. And then one day while I was out walking it hit me, out of the blue. This wasn't about coffee and cookies at all. This was about grief. Dan Danford used to come in at the crack of dawn on Sundays and make coffee. Then he got sick and died. Then Pem Cooley left. Then Richard Fields, who took over making coffee from Dan, he got sick and died. No one really had any beef with a fellowship hour after church. They just wanted to know that someone was going to look after them now. Someone was going to be around, and stay around, to nurture them on Sundays. Once we dealt with that grief and assured people that as long as you were at Covenant, there would always, always, be someone who cared about you and nurtured you and fed you, things were fine.

You all are about to find yourselves out into the wilderness (or maybe some of you have thought you've been there for the last 9-1/2 years!). There won't be any wild animals or danger of starvation, but there will be lots of uncertainty; not all that long in the grand scheme of things, but certainly longer than you are comfortable with. You won't like being up in the air. You won't like not being in control of the process. You might worry about the practical things, like who will look after you, or how long it will take to call a new pastor. You might wonder if you can really trust the Search Committee. You might be tempted to whine and complain, or worse, leave.

There are two things I hope you will remember:

First. That God is ultimately the one leading you during this time. Yes, the elders will be out in front of you, leading and guiding the church in its day-to-day life, visiting you and seeing to it that the ministries of Covenant continue, but God is ultimately the one who will get you through the wilderness. There is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to be anxious about. Uncertainty, yes, but uncertainty never killed anyone.

And that leads us to the second thing I hope you will remember: there are things to be learned in the wilderness. God could have had Moses lead the Israelites along the very safe coast of the Mediterranean and on into Canaan a few weeks later, but God chose the scenic route instead because Israel had a few things to learn along the way. Mostly to trust God. The truth is, we never know what the future holds. We may think we do, but we are only fooling ourselves. And every now and then we find ourselves out in the wilderness without all those resources we thought we were providing ourselves – food, water, some measure of self-determination – and we realize that all of those things come only from the hand of God. We haven't protected or provided for ourselves at all. We haven't kept ourselves, or our family, or our church safe and strong. The wilderness teaches us to trust God, to depend on God, and not ourselves.

But what you might have to do in the next few weeks and months is become experts at hunting for manna. Manna. God's way of providing for us out in the wilderness. The problem is, it doesn't look like anything we've ever seen before. It didn't look like bread or leeks or onions or lentils or any of the things that the Israelites depended on back in Egypt. It doesn't look like any of the things we think we need to survive and manage life. It is so different, in fact, that you might not even recognize it. You may not know that it is blessing and sustenance and provision straight from the hand of God. So in four weeks' time, or come Advent, or in nine months from now, if you stumble across something new or different or foreign that makes you say,

Ugh! what is it?! We've never seen that before, or

that's a different way of doing things, or

but it's not the same if the pastor doesn't visit me!

I hope you will stop for just a minute and take a closer look at it, and ask yourselves if maybe, just maybe, this is manna? Is this new and unfamiliar thing God's way of providing for us out here in the wilderness? Is this strange, new thing actually life-giving? You might even have to try it to see before you decide for sure. And if it is, gather it up, and let it feed you.

You will get to Canaan, I promise you that. Covenant is a strong, healthy, vital church, and you will continue to be. But for now, you will have to go through the wilderness. Just remember your survival guide: Don't be anxious. Trust that God is leading you. Look for the manna.