

**JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS**  
**LENT 4 – I HOPE WE’RE NOT LIKE GRASSHOPPERS!**

(03/31/19)

Scripture Lessons: Numbers 13:1-3, 17-21, 25-33; 14:1-10, 26-35  
Luke 9:57-62

*“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

In our worship this Lenten season we have been reflecting on what has been called a wilderness experience and noting how often in the Bible it is tied to the number forty. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness following his baptism. An angel nourished Elijah during his forty-day wilderness journey to Mt. Horeb. At the time of Noah, God caused the rain to fall for forty days and forty nights.

This morning we will consider how the number forty relates to the Exodus, the journey of the ancient Israelites from captivity in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. We all know that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness that is now Saudi Arabia for forty years. Less well known, however, is the *extra* forty years that the Lord God Yahweh tacked on to their wilderness experience as a punishment for lacking the courage to do battle with the Canaanites when they arrived at the border of the Promised Land.

The Israelites originally enter Egypt through Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Through his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph is released from prison. His role in helping the Egyptians prepare for the seven years of famine predicted by Pharaoh’s dreams secures his position as Pharaoh’s righthand advisor. Joseph's family comes to live with him in Egypt at the time of the famine.

As generations pass, the Egyptians, who no longer remember the great deeds of Joseph, no longer honor his descendants. They enslave the Israelites. The Israelites have no identity and no land of their own. They are in danger of losing not only their culture but also their religion, that unique sense of God's covenant that was originally established with them through Abraham.

During his religious experience in the wilderness, his encounter with God as a fire that does not consume, Moses receives God’s call to set his people free. God tries to persuade Pharaoh to release his people by visiting ten plagues on the land: (1) the waters of the Nile turn to blood; (2) frogs cover the land; (3) the land is infested by lice; (4) the

land is infested by flies; (5) the Egyptian cattle die of boils; (6) the Egyptians are afflicted by sores; (7) the land is devastated by hail and fire; (8) the crops are destroyed by locusts; (9) total darkness covers the land for three days and three nights; and (10) the angel of death kills all the first born Egyptian children.

Passover, which falls on April 20, the day before Easter this year, reminds the Jewish people of how the angel of death “passed over” the homes of the Israelites. As a result of the plagues called down on the Egyptians by Moses, Pharaoh reluctantly agrees to let the Israelites go. The Israelites miraculously cross over the Red Sea while their pursuers perish in the process.

The Israelites then wander for forty years in the wilderness. The word “wander” is appropriate, for they should have been able to cover the ground from northern Egypt to Canaan in six months—a year at most. They are often discouraged, often tempted to turn back. They long to return to Egypt where, though they were slaves, they at least had a place to live and something to eat. Moses and Aaron struggle to keep them together. God feeds them with manna and quail from heaven, and water that flows from a rock. In one of the crowning moments in our religious history, Moses is granted permission to actually see God. He then receives God's will for his people through the Ten Commandments that are codified in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai.

But the Promised Land is not yet theirs; it has to be taken away from the Canaanites, a people about whom they know nothing. Like any good general, Moses sets up camp at the foot of the mountains that separate his people from their goal. He sends out spies to bring back the information they need to formulate a plan of action.

The spies scout out the enemy territory, but instead of bringing back a plan of action they bring back a plan of inaction. The spies report that the Canaanite people are really big, so big that compared to them the Israelites are like grasshoppers. On the basis of this disheartening report, the Israelites decide not to attack. Joshua and Caleb want to push on, but the people are so afraid of the Canaanites and are so determined to retreat they almost stone Joshua and Caleb.

As a consequence of their decision to back off from the challenge that lay before them, the Israelites spend the next forty years in the same wilderness. Forty more years pass before they are able to have a land and an identity of their own. As a punishment for

the people's cowardice, their lack of faith, Moses never gets to enter the land he has worked so hard to reach. He dies just as they are about to enter.

The compiler of the history and author of this scriptural passage, which was written around 800 B.C.E., was not only relating history. He was also making a point. He concluded that the Israelites had been punished for turning back when they were within sight of their goal. To be more precise, God did not actually punish them; God brought upon them no more than the full consequences of their caution. To be sure, the report of the spies was discouraging, but after all they had been through, the people should have trusted in God's promise that they would be given a land of their own, and that God would accompany them in their struggles, just as he did later with little David in his battle against Goliath.

This story is a lesson in human nature, a lesson symbolized by the scouts' report: "Compared to them, we felt like grasshoppers." It is a lesson about discouragement. The word "dis-courage" means to lack courage. It shows us the extent to which our mental constructs, the way we view life, the way we view difficult or challenging situations, determines our behavior. An entire generation of Israelites died in the wilderness during the second forty years, just as many of us die physically or emotionally when we are unable to take the steps we need to take to move forward in our life.

Yahweh led the Israelites into the wilderness because their ordeal in the wilderness was an important factor in forging their identity. They spend forty years in the wilderness on their journey to freedom. Then they spend another forty years, an *unnecessary* forty years in the wilderness because they are unable to act courageously. This second forty years is not a time of growth. It is wasted time, the consequences of cowardice, their reluctance to take on the challenge that life has placed before them.

We may be driven into the wilderness by forces beyond our control. Whether the wilderness experience is physical like an illness, financial like the loss of a job, relational like a marital problem, or personal like a psychological problem, we are often driven into it against our will. If we use this time to strengthen the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, we will not only survive, we will be transformed by our wilderness ordeal. However, if we lack the courage to do what we need to do, if we lack the courage to do what God

calls us to do, we may spend many additional years, many unproductive years just wandering.

Like the ancient Israelites at the time of the Exodus, we need courage to face the challenges that confront us as individuals. We may feel caught or stuck in a difficult life situation. We may be struggling with an addiction that threatens to destroy us but which we are afraid to give up. We may not feel adequate to cope with our difficult children and/or our aging parents. We need to remember that God is with us, just as Yahweh was with the ancient Israelites. God gives us the strength we need to carry the heavy load so many of us carry.

It takes courage to deal with aging, with declining health. We may feel our strength slipping away. The loss of our hearing or eyesight may confine us to an increasingly smaller world. We need to remember that God is with us, just as Yahweh was with the ancient Israelites. God not only works for healing within us, God gives us the strength we need to make the adjustments we need to make in the various seasons of our lives.

It takes courage to work through conflict in a marriage. It takes courage to face the reality of a situation, to pull away the veils of rationalization and denial. It takes courage to face ourselves, to see our part in the conflict, to see the work that *we* need to do to bring about the change that needs to take place. We need to remember that God is with us, just as Yahweh was with the ancient Israelites. God not only wants us to be fulfilled as individuals, God *intends* that we should live in loving relationships.

It takes courage to face the future. We may be young, not knowing how we will connect with the great stream of life, not knowing if we will be able to connect with it in a meaningful or fulfilling way. We may be middle-aged, facing uncertain times and the threat of financial instability. We may be elderly, uncertain what the future will bring, perhaps facing it alone rather than with the companionship of that person who was so much a part of our life for so many years. We need to remember that God is with us, just as Yahweh was with Elijah. God will guide us through that still small voice within.

It takes courage to face change. At times we are confronted by the need to embrace a change that we did not initiate. If we do not change, do not adapt to the new situation, our life will come to a screeching halt. Sometimes we are the ones who need to

initiate the change, who need to make the decision to launch out into unknown territory. Whether it is adapting to a change that has been forced upon us or initiating a change we know deep down we need to undertake, we need to remember that God is with us, that throughout history God has both initiated change and helped people rise to the occasion, that God is constantly leading us forth into an evolving and fulfilling life.

It also takes courage for us as a church to face the future. Many mainline churches in our time are struggling or in decline. Many are pulling back from their sense of mission to the community and the world to marshal their energies for self-preservation. Many pastors are afraid to challenge their parishioners, to call them forth into a fullness of faith and mission. Many churches are recoiling from the demand, from the need to change. They cling to the old ways, the old patterns, the old structures, the old traditions, the old wineskins, the comfortable, rather than embrace the new and challenging.

We need to remember that if we keep the faith, believing and trusting that God is calling us forth to be the church we need to be--a healthy, vital, vibrant force in the lives of our parishioners, our community, and our world, God will walk with us on our journey. Whatever it is that God is calling us to be or to become, I hope that we will have more courage than the ancient Israelites. I hope that we will not be so fearful and conservative that we will feel like grasshoppers when confronted by the challenge.

When we back off from the challenges of life, we oppose a vital instinct within us: the instinct to grow, to participate in God's ongoing creation. Something deep within us calls us to this challenge as individuals and as a church. It calls us to leave the suffocating fortress of security to do battle with whatever it is that we need to face.

We all have wilderness experiences in our lives, times when we, like the ancient Israelites, like Jesus and Elijah, find ourselves wandering in the desert, those times when we, like Noah, find ourselves at sea. These wilderness experiences, whether we initiated them or not, can be times of tremendous growth. They can lead to the deepening of our faith. Scripture tells us that God not only leads us forth into the wilderness, God provides what we need to keep us alive, to keep us going. While we are in the wilderness, God provides what we need to not only survive but to be transformed by our ordeal.

As individuals and as a church, let's be sure we don't spend an additional forty years wandering in the wilderness because we lack the courage to make the changes we

need to make. We need to take on the challenges that life places before us. We need to *embrace* the changes that are necessary to become who God wants us to be. Let not our condemnation be that as individuals, families, or as a church we were within sight of our goal, but we backed off because we thought of ourselves as grasshoppers.

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March 31, 2019*