

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS
LENT 5 -- MOSES ON MOUNT SINAI

(04/07/19)

Scripture Lesson: Exodus 34:27-35

“Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.”

(Ex 34: 28)

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, the forty days and six Sundays preceding Easter, is a time that we set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter and hopefully our own experience of resurrection. During this time, we reflect on the last days our Lord spent on earth in human form and how his journey relates to our own spiritual journey.

This Lenten season, we have been focusing on the wilderness experience from a biblical perspective, noting how often it is associated with the number forty. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. Although Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, caused the earth to return to a wilderness state when he caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights, he did spare Noah and his family to become what is known as a remnant. The prophet Elijah, following his triumph over the priests of Baal, was sustained in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights by an angel of the Lord, thus enabling him to complete his journey to Mount Horeb.

Last week we recalled how the ancient Israelites, during the time of the Exodus, not only spent forty years in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land, they spent an *additional* forty years because they lacked the courage to face the challenges that life placed before them. Today I would like us to think about Moses and the two times he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. That’s right—*two* times!

After our worship last week, several of you mentioned that you found my summary of the events of the Exodus helpful. The Bible is one of the four pillars of our faith as Protestants. However, the members of our church, a community church, come from many different religious traditions. It only makes sense that some of us would know a good deal of biblical history and others of us wouldn’t. In this church, it is perfectly fine to start right where you are.

Even if you received a Christian education as children, and therefore know a lot of the Bible stories, it never hurts to be reminded of them. No matter how much we know about the

Bible, we can always find some new way of understanding a passage of scripture and discerning how it might relate to our life. This is how we grow both in our understanding of the Bible and in our own personal faith, in our relationship with God.

The Israelites spend forty years wandering in the wilderness on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Yahweh not only calls them forth to this journey, he gives them the resources they need to survive it. When they are hungry, they are miraculously fed with quail and manna. When they are thirsty, Moses calls forth water by striking a rock with his staff. When the Israelites face what seems to be an impossible barrier, with the Red Sea before them and the Egyptians in hot pursuit behind them, Yahweh miraculously parts the waters, enabling the Israelites to pass over onto dry land, while the Egyptians that follow are drowned.

Perhaps most importantly, Yahweh gives his people a leader to guide them. While he is alone on the mountain tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Moses hears Yahweh speak from a burning bush, calling him to free his people from their slavery. When Moses protests that he is unfit, that he is not up to the task, Yahweh assigns Aaron to accompany him. After that, no excuses are accepted!

Moses asks Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh, not surprisingly, refuses. Yahweh then visits the land with ten plagues. This may strike us as a little harsh, especially when we read that Yahweh “hardens the heart of Pharaoh” so Pharaoh won’t let the Israelites go. It doesn’t seem fair for Yahweh to harden someone’s heart and then whack him because he has a hard heart! Perhaps at this stage in his evolution, God felt he needed to make a dramatic point. In any event, it is clear how much God values freedom. God values human freedom so highly that no price is too high to achieve it. *There are times in our life when we may need to remember this.*

While they are in the wilderness, the Israelites are tempted to turn back. They rail against their leaders; they constantly whine and complain. This seems to be human nature. When life calls us forth into the wilderness, we, too, may be inclined to whine, to complain about how unjust life can be. If we regress, however, our growth comes to a halt. As painful as the wilderness can be, at least it carries the potential for psychological and spiritual growth, leading us forth to become the people that God wants us to be.

The wilderness experience was a transformative experience for the Israelites. It helped them find their religious identity. It helped them become a people, a nation. As the German

philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has said, every battle that does not destroy us makes us stronger. The meaning of life is not to avoid conflict; it is to engage life fully and grow through it. These are the struggles that shape our soul.

Yahweh not only gives the Israelites food, water, and the leader they need for their journey, he also gives them some guidelines. The Israelites are given a rule of life not only for their sojourn in the wilderness but also for when they reach the Promised Land. They are given a rule of life not only for them but for all humanity, not only for that point in history but forever. The Ten Commandments will always be applicable to human community. Whether our Constitution allows us to carve them on the front of public buildings is not important. They are so much a part of our culture, our civilization that they can never be removed or erased. What is important is not that we post them on our public buildings, but that we post them, we engrave them, we enshrine them within our hearts.

During his forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai, Moses receives the Ten Commandments engraved on two stone tablets. When he returns to his people, he finds that they have regressed in his absence. They are worshipping a golden calf instead of the Lord God Yahweh. When Moses sees this, his anger burns hot. He smashes the tablets of the Law on the ground, shattering them to pieces. He then burns the calf, grinds it to powder, mixes it with water, and forces the Israelites to drink it. Another example of tough love!

After Moses cools down, he intercedes with Yahweh for his people; he begs Yahweh not to destroy them; he asks Yahweh to give them a second chance. He also asks Yahweh if he could please see his glory. Yahweh tells Moses that if he were to look directly on his face, he would die on the spot. This is because of the tremendous power of the divine unmediated presence.

Yahweh does agree, however, to give Moses a glimpse of the sacred. He places Moses in the cleft of a rock. Then Yahweh covers Moses' face with his hand while he passes by, enabling Moses to glimpse his back but not his face.

Following this epiphany, Moses again ascends the mountain. He remains there a second forty days and forty nights. During this time, Yahweh gives him another set of tablets.

In those days, people believed God was up in the sky, so the higher you got the closer you were to God. This is why there were so many sacred mountains. Now we know that the journey up the sacred mountain is metaphorical. You don't need to actually climb a mountain to be close

to God. God is already with you and within you wherever you are. As Robert Pirsig, the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, has said: “The only Zen you will find at the top of a mountain is the Zen you bring up there.” However, this doesn’t mean that you can’t find a journey to a sacred mountain like Mt. Kailas in Tibet spiritually meaningful!

When Moses comes down from the mountain with the second copy of the Decalogue, his face is shining. Moses has come face to face with Yahweh; he has talked with Yahweh. Because of the power of his religious experience, his appearance has radically changed. It has changed so much that at first the Israelites are afraid to go near him. In response, Moses covers his face with a veil when he is talking with the Israelites, but he takes it off when he talks directly to Yahweh.

The encounter with God was a powerful, a transformative experience. Because of his experience of Yahweh, his conversation with Yahweh, Moses was not the same. You could actually *see* the difference!

What would we look like if we saw God? What would we look like if we saw Jesus? What would we look like if we experienced God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit in a powerful way? It should make a difference, not only inside but also outside. It should be apparent not only to us, but also to other people that something powerful had happened.

When people see our face, what do they see? Do they see a person radiant with the presence of God? Do they see someone who has experienced the peace that passes all understanding? When people hear our words, what do they hear? Do they hear words of joy, of love, of compassion? Or do they hear anger, complaints, and constant criticism?

If we are really Christian, if we hold daily communion with our Lord, shouldn’t it show in our faces, in our words, in our actions? It did with Jesus. It has been said that Jesus was *transparent* to God. When you looked at Jesus, you saw through him to God. Can the same be said of us?

Moses wandered for forty years in the wilderness. He spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments. Then, after he threw away everything that Yahweh had given him, he returned once again to the mountain. He spent another forty days and forty nights alone in the presence of the Lord. When he finally returned to his people, his face was shining.

During this Lenten season, let us try to come so close to God that it makes a difference. Let our experience of God be so powerful that it shines forth in our visage, that it shows in our words and actions. Let our experience of God be so powerful and our relationship with God so deep that it shines forth through this church, through our life together and our mission, that God's light might shine forth in us and through us to a darkened world.

Let us be with our Lord as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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