

THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE #2
ELIJAH IN THE WILDERNESS

(09/05/2021)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Kings 19:1-18

“The angel of the Lord came to him a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He [Elijah] got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”

(1 Kings 19:7-8)

Today, on communion Sunday, since we are individually and collectively still stuck in this stupid coronavirus pandemic, we are going to return briefly to the theme of the wilderness experience as an inner as well as an outer ordeal. A few weeks ago, we reflected on Jesus’ experience in the wilderness as it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark. The forty days and nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness immediately following his baptism brought about a transformation in either who he was or in his understanding and acceptance of who he was. This can also happen to us as we journey through the wilderness experiences of our lives, those times when, in the words of the 23rd psalm, we pass through “the valley of the shadow of death,” which can also be translated as “the valley of deep darkness.”

As we noted in Mark’s description of Jesus’ wilderness experience, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. The number forty, as it appears in the Bible, may be a literal but is undoubtedly a symbolic measure of time. The Israelites wandered forty years in the wilderness on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. At the time of the Great Flood, God caused it to rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. This morning we heard the story of the prophet Elijah and his preparation for the forty days of his wilderness journey.

By the time we’re done with our Lenten series, we are all going to be experts on the number forty! I know what you’re thinking: that plus \$3.00 will get you a medium Pumpkin Spice Signature Latte at Dunkin—if you are a card-carrying Dunkin member, but only until September 14. But you never know. When you reach the pearly gates, wouldn’t you be surprised if the entrance exam is about the archetypal significance of the number forty, e.g., why there are forty days in the season of Lent? Then you’d be happy that you were here this morning—and that you stayed awake during the sermon!

What do we know about Elijah? Elijah was an Israelite prophet who lived in the first half of the ninth century B.C.E., during the reign of kings Ahab and Ahaziah. Elijah is the protagonist of four stories in the book of Kings. Today we are focusing on the latter part of the first of these stories. The basic story is as follows.

Elijah calls forth a drought from God to punish the Israelites for worshipping false gods. In those days, prophets were really tough on their parishioners when they didn't live up to the prophet's expectations! The drought ends in a contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal: the god who answers his prophet's call by sending down fire to consume the sacrifice on the altar will be declared the one true god. Yahweh, the God of Israel, sends down a flame to burn up the sacrificial animal and wins the contest. Elijah then slaughters four hundred of the priests of Baal. Prophets in those days were really tough on their competition as well as their own people!

The wicked queen Jezebel, seeking vengeance for the slaughter of her priests, vows to kill Elijah. Elijah flees to Horeb, where he has a powerful religious experience. God comes to him in a vision and tells him to anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha to continue the slaughter of those who worship Baal. The first story ends with Elisha becoming Elijah's disciple.

This morning, we focus on Elijah as he flees from Jezebel's wrath and also from his own people, for the Israelites were understandably annoyed that he had asked Yahweh to punish them with a drought. Elijah comes to Beersheba, a relatively safe place for him to stay since it is part of the territory occupied by the tribe of Judah. However, scripture tells us that Elijah leaves his servant there, in a safe place, while he goes forth alone into the wilderness.

This passage reminds me of the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob, who has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, flees to Haran where he stays with his uncle Laban. However, Jacob knows that he must eventually return to the land of his birth and claim his place in the spiritual evolution of his people. On his way back, the day before he will meet his estranged brother, Jacob leaves his two wives, his eleven children, and his servants and enters the wilderness alone. There he has a powerful religious experience; he wrestles with an angel who both wounds him and blesses him.

Like Jacob, Elijah encounters the angel of God when he is alone in the wilderness. Remember, the wilderness is not only a physical place; it is also the mental and spiritual state in which we find ourselves during the difficult times of our lives. A wilderness experience is a time of trial, a time of ordeal, a time when we are tempted to turn back to a life which we know is not healthy for us, a life that is not meant to be our future. *According to scripture, the wilderness is often the place where we encounter or are encountered by God.*

Elijah goes a day's journey into the wilderness and sits down under a solitary broom tree. He is afraid for his life. Scripture tells us,

[Elijah] asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Elijah is obviously depressed. If you have ever been depressed, you will recognize the symptoms. Elijah engages in negativistic thinking. He has withdrawn from others and from life. He is not eating or drinking. He is feeling helpless and hopeless. He is angry at life. He globalizes and catastrophizes. He experiences suicidal ideation, believing that the world would be better off without him. He seeks to escape his inner torment by falling asleep. He probably hopes he will just fall asleep and never wake up, a common fantasy for people who believe that only death will provide the solution to their problems.

If you have ever been depressed, if you have ever had a wilderness experience, you might recognize some of these symptoms. You might also find it heartening to remember that one of the greatest prophets of all time experienced the same psychological and spiritual struggles and torments when he went through his wilderness experience! Then again, you may not find this heartening. I am trying to get you to think positive. That's what therapists and ministers try to do.

Elijah, upset that life isn't going the way he wanted, lies down under a tree, and falls asleep. Suddenly an angel appears. Because Elijah is asleep, his interaction with the angel probably took place in what we would call a dream. And what does the angel say to Elijah in the dream? What words of wisdom does this messenger bring from God bring? The angel tells Elijah, "Get up and eat."

Get up and eat! These are indeed words of wisdom for Elijah and, also, for us when we are passing through the valley of deep darkness. Elijah, like all of us, has outer problems, but *his outer problems are exacerbated by his inner attitude*. Elijah wishes his outer problems would go away. He wishes they would disappear, and he is angry when they don't. He doesn't think it is fair that he should be unjustly persecuted. So, he curls up under his little tree and sulks.

If we think of the angel as a psychotherapist, he/she is a little light on the empathy that is regarded as an important part of psychotherapy! The angel employs what we would call tough love. The angel doesn't want to hear Elijah's complaints about how his life is both difficult and unfair. The angel knows that Elijah has a job to do, a contribution to make to life on behalf of God. This is not the time for Elijah to sit around sucking his thumb and feeling sorry for himself. The angel tells him to begin the journey.

Elijah awakens, rises, and discovers that the angel has miraculously provided him with the food he needs for his journey—a cake baked on hot rocks and a jar of water. Scripture tells us time and time again that when we are in the wilderness, God will provide. God fed the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness with quail, manna from heaven, and water

from the rock. When Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, “the angels ministered to him.” When we are in the wilderness, if we open our eyes, we may discover that God has already provided what we need.

Elijah does as the angel commands. He starts to move forward with his life, but then he suffers a relapse. He decides to go back to sleep. He is still stuck in his depression. He feels the power of inertia that makes it difficult for us, when we are depressed, to get out of bed. The angel returns to Elijah and tells him to get up. If he doesn’t take care of himself, he will not have the strength he needs to undertake the journey, a journey that will last forty days.

What “feeds” us when we are stuck in the depression that often accompanies a wilderness experience? Some people find emotional nourishment through psychotherapy or support groups, others through the encouragement of friends. Some rediscover a reservoir of energy when they force their body to move, when they go to the gym or just take a walk. Some are fed by reading something that helps them understand the dynamics that are pulling them under. Some are fed by music. Different things feed different people.

We need to remember that when we find ourselves in the wilderness, like Elijah, we can be fed by the Word of God. We can turn to scripture for comfort and guidance. We can open ourselves to God in prayer. We can talk to Jesus about what we are going through. We can find community within a church. God reaches out to us in many ways. All we need to do is wake up, get up, and practice some healthy self-care!

Elijah gets up, takes the nourishment that the angel has provided, and sets forth on his journey. He travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. At Mount Horeb, Elijah has another powerful religious experience. God appears to Elijah as a great wind, an earthquake, a fire, and finally, in “a still small voice,” also translated as “a sound of sheer silence.” Following his religious experience, Elijah receives instruction that will guide him in his ongoing battle against the priests of Baal.

When we are going through a wilderness experience, it can be heartening to remember that God has not forsaken us, that God will not forsake us, and that God will provide what we need on our journey. All we need to do is open our eyes to see it, open our hearts to receive it, and open our lives to embrace it.

The bread and wine that is given to a penitent by a priest during the sacramental administration of Last Rites, is called the *viaticum*. The word “viaticum” literally means “bread for the journey.” It is a spiritual nourishment, a spiritual sustenance for the journey upon which the dying person is about to embark.

Jesus reaches out to us just like the angel reached out to Elijah. Jesus does not promise to take away our struggles, to make our life easy, to spare us from having to undergo our wilderness experiences. After all, he had his own wilderness experience, an experience that transformed him. However, Jesus promises that he will give us what we need to go through it, what we need to survive it, and, like Elijah, what we need to be spiritually and psychologically transformed by it. He promises us that we will not go through it alone.

As we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us open ourselves to the healing, comforting, empowering presence of Jesus Christ. Let us partake of the spiritual food that Jesus offers us in this sacrament, “food for the journey” in this life and the next.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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September 5, 2021*