

Lessons From the Wilderness, Pt. 1
Fourth Week in Epiphany
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Text: 1 Kings 19:9-12, Matthew 4:1-11

“I feel like an alien in my own country,” the person said, amid the mere nine days that seem more like nine months since our new President took office.

She is not alone.

While her frustration was about the government, she was, in many ways, speaking her identity as a Christian. The idea of a resident alien is core to our Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, God has a word or two about how we are to think about resident aliens – whether the resident alien is someone visiting our land from another, or whether we are the ones who are resident in a foreign land.

In the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus, God’s people, the children of Israel, are instructed to care for those from other countries.

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

Then, over in the New Testament book of 1 Peter, the apostle instructs God’s people in a different context. When they are traveling in foreign lands, they are to avoid taking on any sinful behavior practiced by those in the country they are visiting. In other words, they are to remember who they are and whose they are.

God’s people have always had to think that way. Throughout scripture and throughout history, God’s people have, time and time again, found themselves in unfamiliar surroundings.

Today in America, at least for many, the idea of being a resident alien has an altogether new meaning. After the first days in Trump nation, many feel truly *alienated* – even as this president seems to be trying to alienate every other nation and tens of millions of people here at home, with every thinned-skin tweet, childish outburst and half-thought-out executive order. Just in the last 48 hours, in fact, this president has shut our borders to those facing violence and oppression in war-savaged nations. This, he thinks, puts America first.

Now, we should be clear. This is the America that some wanted – whatever “this” is. We live in the reality of a deeply divided nation. Even then, it’s hard to understand just whom this president thinks he represents. Former Vice President Joe Biden aptly said, “It is like a Rubik’s cube, trying to figure this guy out.”

So even though we live in the same houses and wake up in the same beds as before the election, many feel as if they are in the wilderness. Every day, the surroundings seem more foreign. Every day, many Americans feel that much more disoriented than the day before.

But hear this: God has a long, long history of being present in a particular way with her people when they are in the wilderness.

For 40 years, the children of Israel wandered in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt, before they reached the Promised Land. Centuries later, God's people were thrown back out into the wilderness, exiled by the powerful Babylonians. God was always there.

We also know that our Lord Jesus Christ began his life on the run from the evil of the world. You remember how Mary, Joseph and the newborn Christ child went "home by another way" because an insecure dictator was out to eliminate God come into the world. Three decades later, Christ went into the wilderness before beginning his public ministry, a ministry that itself was three years almost constantly on the move.

In the same way, the early church was on the move, sometimes fleeing for their lives, but most times to spread the gospel in foreign lands. The Apostle Paul, who is credited with writing 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, traveled 10,000 miles in his ministry. Yes, God's people have plenty of experience in times of wilderness and desert and sojourn.

Sometimes, though, our wilderness and desert times don't involve ever leaving home. We may wander in a wilderness of a different type. The wilderness we know may be emotional, spiritual or relational. And if you have been there, you know how that kind of virtual, spiritual wilderness can be just as isolating, just as disheartening, just as desperate.

So today and next week, whatever sense of wilderness you may feel, whether personal or patriotic, I thought it might help to remember what God's people have learned in their wilderness days, timeless lessons for the Christian traveler in any time.

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A first lesson is this: It is wise to make note of your surroundings.

How often have we heard stories of experienced hikers who get lost for days? Those stories always make me wonder: How can it happen to veteran outdoorspeople? But if it happens to them, how easily it can happen to us. One minute we know where we are. The next, we don't. Anyone who has wandered around the parking deck looking for their car knows that much.

As for America, more than a few are spending extra time these days with their maps and charts out, studying their compass, trying to figure out just where we are as a nation are, one that is fond of calling itself “Christian.”

Just when we thought that the trends were clear, that America was moving relentlessly toward a more just, open, accepting, multi-cultural future, a new America of untold promise, we now are met with what seems like an army of those who want to push America back, back to the 1950s, an isolationist, nationalistic, racist, sexist, xenophobic island, a white America that is the opposite of what we thought was our certain future.

So, what can we learn in the wilderness? In these times, as scripture attests, God calls us to take a deep breath, to calm down and to notice what in our surroundings is different and what is the same.

One thing that is the same: God was with them. God is with us. She is always with her people. God was with Israel in the desert, going ahead in a holy cloud. God was with the people in exile, speaking to them in prophets to remind them of their identity and purpose.

God was with the disciples in Christ. Then, in the Holy Spirit, she was always with the church as it endured and outlasted persecution. God is with us. No matter how lost we may feel, that much never changes.

Another constant is that God’s people always have each other. Rarely do we find in scripture a story about one of God’s people being completely alone. Almost always, even in hardship, God’s people have their family, friends and members of their tribe with them.

So in those times when our surroundings may be truly foreign, God promises her presence and the company and community of other seekers and believers as a constant.

A second lesson is that in our wilderness times we are all the more prone to make mistakes. When nothing seems familiar, we reach for answers in bad decisions and bad judgment, especially in the form of idols and false gods.

Remember how the children of Israel under Moses pled for the chance to go back to Egypt, back to being slaves? Remember, when Moses was too long on Mt. Sinai, they melted their gold and made a god, just to have something they could have and hold?

We do the same today.

When people can’t make sense of the world’s complexities, they reach for simple, understandable, black-and-white answers and ideologies. People scramble and grasp for something they think makes sense, something they can worship ... all because we cannot trust what we cannot see, all because we are sure we have the answers inside

us rather than putting our trust, faith and hope in a God who works in ways we don't see and may never understand.

The devil knew it, at least that's what we read in the story of Christ's wilderness temptation. As the story goes, the devil tempts Christ with power, with creature comforts and even by baiting Christ's ego. That's how evil attacks us still today. We are seeing in these days just how powerful the temptation of ego really is, how the evil in the world is often more inside us and in our insecurities – and those of our leaders - than outside us.

A third lesson is this: When we are in the wilderness, God is usually preparing us for something. We are in the desert to learn something, most often to trust the Lord our God. To do that, we have to be quiet.

I am sure that things in my house may be a lot like in yours. When the news is on, there is a lot of talking back to the TV. At the office or on Facebook or other social media, discussions are filled with the same noise, political back and forth, sometimes bitter exchanges that leave scars on the participants.

One day, someone swears they are done making political comments. The next day they are back at it with a fury, confessing they could not remain quiet at whatever they perceive to be the latest outrage.

I do not mean to say that as God's people we are to be passive and silent all the time. No, we are living through unprecedented times in many ways, real injustice, real aggression, real violence against the vulnerable and oppressed, real deception and attempted hi-jacking of government through fake news and alternative facts, things we used to call outright, bald-faced and vicious lies.

But how are we to hear God if we do not make as much or more room in our souls and in our households for God as we spend listening to or worrying about the news?

When God called the prophet Elijah, as we heard in our Old Testament reading, God did not ask Elijah to sit in his living room and turn on CNN. God sent Elijah out for 40 days and nights to travel through the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God. There, Elijah took up residence in a cave.

Then and only then did God come. God sent a great and powerful storm that tore the mountain apart. But God was not in the storm. God sent an earthquake to finish off the mountain, but God was not in the earthquake. God sent a fire to clear away anything that might hinder Elijah's hearing and understanding. But God was not in the fire.

God came, yes, but God came in a whisper. Elijah heard God in the whisper and then Elijah home to work for God's purposes.

It's no exaggeration to describe what our nation is experiencing as a storm, as an earthquake, as a fire that threaten to burn away all that is good and worthy in our nation.

The question is this: How are we listening for God in these tumultuous days, if we are listening at all? We may be cursing the storm, the earthquake and the fire. But are we remaining quiet to hear the still small voice in which God speaks to her people when they feel lost and afraid?

God's people have often found themselves in uncomfortable places. Nowhere in scripture does God promise that life will be easy, that leaders will always be virtuous, that governments will always be upright and focused on the common good. Government in any form, Republican, Democratic or Populist Demagoguery is, after all, only the construct of broken human beings.

But God has never left her people's side. Even when God's people feel lost – and are lost – they are not, not to God.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth taught, preached and bore witness through his own wilderness times, those dark days of the mid-20th century when the world was tearing itself apart in World War II. Through it all, Barth stood for the one Truth that puts all other truths to shame, the Truth of God in Christ.

So I close with one helpful idea of his, that of “disciplined hope.” Barth wrote:

The Christian hope is the most revolutionary thing that one can imagine, and next to it all other revolutions are only blank cartridges. But it is a disciplined hope; it puts people in their place.

Where they can be quite restless and at the same time quite peaceful, where they can be with the others in the congregation in which the members recognize each other in longing and in humility in light of the divine humor, there they will do what has to be done. In this way the church moves with patience and with haste toward the future of the Lord.

O Lord, hear the prayer of your people here at Caldwell and elsewhere. And let it be so. Amen.